

ANOMYAL ROUSSEL

ATLAS ARCHIVE EIGHT DOCUMENTS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

THE BIOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS CARADEC
TRANSLATED BY IAN MONK



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RAYMOND ROUSSEL

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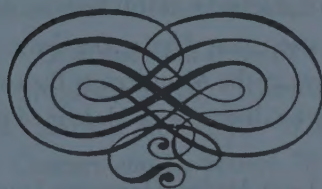
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RAYMOND ROUSSEL

by

François Caradec

Translated by Ian Monk



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ATLAS ARKHIVE
DOCUMENTS OF
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THIS ARKHIVE is a translation of the revised edition (1997) of François Caradec's biography of Raymond Roussel originally published in 1972. The revised edition incorporates material from the mass of Roussel papers discovered in 1989.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE 9

I PERFECT HAPPINESS 1877-1897

Raymond Roussel's Parents 13 • *The Neuilly "Country House"* 14 • *Delicious Memories* 16 • *Marguerite Roussel and her Friends* 24 • *From Janson-de-Sailly to the Conservatoire* 27 • *A Sensation of Universal Glory* 32 • *La Doublure and the Nice Carnival* 37 • *Alphonse Lemerre and the failure of La Doublure* 43 • *Georges Roussel — the elder brother* 50 • *Mon Âme, Arthur Meyer and Le Gaulois* 50

II IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA 1898-1911

The Years of Prospecting 57 • *Of Games and Dogs* 61 • *What Procedure, in Fact?* 62 • *Meeting with Jules Verne, Chiquenaude* 66 • *Germaine Roussel, Duchesse d'Elchingen* 70 • *Raymond Roussel and His Mother* 72 • *The Leiris Family* 74 • *A Gift for Imitation* 75 • *La Vue, Le Concert and La Source* 78 • *Marcel Proust, The Trip to Egypt* 83 • *Solitary Work on the Procedure* 87 • *Fun and Games* 92 • *Impressions d'Afrique* 95 • *Critics and Initiated Readers* 101 • *"Queer Notions"* 105 • *Charlotte Dufrène* 109 • *Obsessive Cleanliness* 113 • *Roussel at the Theatre* 114 • *The Trip to India* 118 • *Impressions d'Afrique at the Théâtre Fémina* 119 • *Marguerite Roussel Dies in Biarritz* 122 • *A Rich Bachelor Idler* 126

III LOCUS SOLUS 1912-1922

Impressions d'Afrique at the Théâtre Antoine 131 • *Marguerite Roussel's Estate* 139 • *Michel Ney. Raymond Roussel as Host* 147 • *Locus Solus* 150 • *Paul Bourget, "Brilliant Author of André Cornélis"* 156 • *Robert de Montesquiou* 157 • *"A Warrior"* 165 • *Pages Choiesies* 171 • *Pierre Frondaie, Adaptor of Roussel's Novels* 173 • *Around the World — Pierre Loti and Tahiti* 174 • *The Theatre Adaptation of Locus Solus* 185 • *Jules Verne and Eugène Leiris* 187 • *Letters to Robert de Montesquiou* 188 • *Locus Solus at the Théâtre Antoine* 191

IV THE STAR ON THE FOREHEAD, THE DUST OF SUNS 1923-1927

Diminishing Capital 217 • *First Anthologies* 217 • *The Art Lover* 220 • *Raymond Roussel and Willy* 221 • *Camille Flammarion* 225 • *L'Étoile au Front* 227 • *Willy Again* 241 • *From La Révolution surréaliste to Paul Reboux* 243 • *Quotations and Inscriptions* 245 • *Desnos, Vitrac, Boiffard and Michel Leiris* 247 • *The Motorised Caravan and "The Use of Vacuum"* 251 • *La Poussière de Soleils* 257 • *Max Ernst's Chinese Nightingale* 269 • *A Trip to Rome in the Motorised Caravan* 270 • *The Uninterrupted Meal* 272 • *The Revival of La Poussière de Soleils* 275 • *A Trip to the Holy Land and the Middle East* 283

V NEW IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA 1928-1933

Raymond Roussel at the Assize Court 289 • *The Légion d'honneur* 290 • *At the Saint-Cloud Clinic* 292 • *The Death of Germaine Roussel* 294 • *Sale of the House in Neuilly* 297 • *At Père-Lachaise Cemetery* 299 • *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* 301 • *Henri-A. Zo* 307 • *L'Âme de Victor Hugo* 310 • *Inscriptions... and Consecration* 312 • *Documents pour servir de canevas* 317 • *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres* 320 • *The Bishop and Knight Checkmate* 324 • *Raymond Roussel's Will* 328 • *Death in Palermo* 337

APPENDICES

I. *First Editions of the Works of Raymond Roussel* 354

II. *Selected Bibliography of Secondary Sources* 356

III. *Collective Works* 357

IV. *Principal English Translations* 358

Index 359

Picture sources 366

The multiplicity of Roussel's gifts were all sacrificed to his sole passion: literature (to which it is perhaps time to admit him, in accordance with his wish, rather than continuing to treat him as though he were an eccentric).

Michel Leiris, *Journal*, 13 July 1964

PREFACE

In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, the posthumous work that was published two years after his death, Raymond Roussel referred to all the cruises he had taken during his life: "I have travelled a great deal [...] yet] from all these travels I never took anything for my books. It seems to me that this is worth mentioning, since it clearly shows that for me imagination is everything."

This affirmation should be accepted only with caution. In order to check its veracity, a first *Life of Raymond Roussel* was published in 1972, bringing together all of the biographical information then available.

However, in 1989, such a wealth of new material — including unpublished manuscripts, family papers, various correspondences, daily diaries kept by his mother, his brother's notebooks, press cuttings covering all of Roussel's literary life, photographs taken at home or when travelling, account books, etc. — entered the Bibliothèque Nationale that a revision which will never be definitive had to be made. Although this donation has not radically altered our vision of him, the new Roussel archives in the Manuscripts Department, in the Department of Prints and in the Reserves, has significantly broadened our knowledge of the man and his works.

Since he did not earn the popularity that a bourgeois family normally expected of a member that had chosen such a prestigious yet non-lucrative career, he felt obliged to prove that he was honoured and had kept up the traditions of his class — the *palmes académiques*, the *Légion d'honneur*, shooting trophies, an official mistress, an avenue that was to be named after him and, instead of an open house, a family vault with thirty-two cells ready to welcome the titled members of the family of his brother-in-law, the Prince de la Moskowa. We should be neither shocked nor surprised by such mild vanity. It is part and parcel of an *œuvre* Roussel wanted to be the rival of those he considered the greatest writers — Victor Hugo and Jules Verne, of course, but also Pierre Loti and Edmond Rostand. Even Paul Bourget and François Coppée, for he never imagined that many years later such writers would be forgotten and that there would still be Rousselians.

The whims his wealth allowed him, and his obsessive quest for "glory", can make Roussel seem eccentric. But this was rather an attempt to lead a normal life, while protecting his secret existence and his cocoon of solitude and silence, and forcing himself to write nothing that was personal or real. He never described the places he had

visited, and he was the only person ever to have visited the ones he did describe.

Today, more is known about Roussel than about most writers of his period: the first name, surname and photograph of his wet-nurse, his laundry bills at the Ritz, how many times he wore his shirts, his financial investments. We seem to know everything. But as for the colour of his eyes, we have only what the army recruitment board noted (brown eyes, ordinary forehead, round chin, oval face) and nothing about the tone of his voice.

This biography puts at the reader's disposal all that is required to seize the coherence of a *written œuvre* by means of which Raymond Roussel wanted to create a *readable* world.

(The conversion rate into pounds sterling and the effects of inflation can be calculated by multiplying the sums in this book by various amounts: on average, from 1900 to 1910, multiply by 1.7; from 1911 to 1914, by 1.4; from 1915 to 1920, by 1.2 to 0.4; up to 1933, by 0.4 to 0.25.)

I
PERFECT HAPPINESS

1877-1897



RAYMOND ROUSSEL'S PARENTS

In 1877, revolution broke out in Belotina. The fleeing king was replaced by an extremely *red* oligarchy, named, since its members were seven and reciprocally responsible, the *Pleiad of Solidary Tribunes*.*

1877 was also the year of Raymond Roussel's birth. Not only did he play word games with his name, but he also employed a personal numerology. In *Locus Solus*, for example, we encounter Queen Sophia of the Netherlands, who was also born in 1877, Baron Thénard, born in 1777, Edward III, the victor of Crécy, and Ibn Battuta, who both died in 1377, not to mention anagrammatic numbers such as the death of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (almost Roussel!) in 1778.

Raymond Roussel was born in his parents' house at 25, Boulevard Malesherbes, on Saturday 20 January 1877, at six o'clock in the morning. He was the third and last child of Eugène Roussel, aged forty-four, a stockbroker, and of Marguerite Moreau-Chaslon, his wife, without gainful employment, aged thirty.†

His father was born at Évreux, on 4 October 1832; he was the son of Jean-Jacques Roussel, an attorney on Rue Saint-Amand, Paris, and of Marie Anne Eugénie Fernet.‡ Raymond Roussel's mother, Marguerite Moreau-Chaslon, was the daughter of Aristide Moreau who, after marrying Thaïs (or Thés) Chaslon, distinguished himself from the numerous other Moreau families by adding his wife's maiden name to his surname by deed poll on 26 February 1862. He was a Parisian businessman, the head of the board of directors of the General Omnibus Company, which he had founded in 1854.§

Such was the origin of Raymond Roussel's parents' fortune: provincial bourgeois lawyers marrying into the Parisian upper middle-class business set. The stockbroker used this capital to amass even greater wealth — which was later to be greedily eaten up by his widow and children — through a series of property speculations in the west of Paris, and particularly around the L'Étoile *quartier*.

Eugène Roussel and Marguerite were married on 2 January 1866. They set up home in the Madeleine *quartier*, which was then a new development: Boulevard Malesherbes was officially opened by Napoleon III in 1861. The stockbroker's offices were at 30, Avenue de l'Opéra. Their first child was a son, Georges (named after his maternal uncle), born in April 1869 at his parents' home on Boulevard

* The sixth of the *Documents to Serve as an Outline* (trans. John Ashbery), from *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*.

† Roussel archives (catalogue number) 101.

Twenty-second day of January, eighteen hundred and seventy-seven, at three o'clock in the evening;

Birth Certificate of RAYMOND, legally recognised as being of the male sex, born in Paris, Boulevard [sic] Malesherbes, 25; the twentieth inst.; at six o'clock in the morning; son of Eugène ROUSSEL, stockbroker, aged forty-four, and of Marguerite Moreau-Chaslon, his wife, without gainful employment, aged thirty; both dwelling at the above-mentioned address;

Declaration made before Us, Registry Clerk of the eighth arrondissement by the father of the child, in the presence of Victor David, landowner, dwelling at Vésinet (Seine-et-Oise); and of Léon Philippe Brulley de la Brunière, of independent means, aged twenty-seven, in Paris;

Boulevard [sic] Malesherbes, 85; who signed with us after reading the above.

‡ The witnesses of the birth were Jacques Ernest Fernet, a merchant, aged twenty-four, a maternal uncle, and François Quidet, an attorney's chief clerk, aged thirty-five.

§ Aristide Moreau-Chaslon and his wife Thaïs had three children: two daughters, of whom the eldest,

Alix, married Victor Augustin Grimprel, and the youngest, Marguerite, married Eugène Roussel, and a son, Georges — in 1866, Jules Janin, a friend of Aristide Moreau-Chaslon, dedicated his *L'Amour des livres* to this uncle of Raymond Roussel, with the words: "Georges, my young fellow bibliophile."

Malesherbes. It was with him that Marguerite Roussel left Paris and took refuge at Saint-Jean-d'Angély during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. She was then twenty-three, and kept her own diary of the siege of Paris but soon took to copying out the government's official dispatches, mentioning in addition only the letters she received from her husband, who had remained in the besieged capital as a National Guard. On the entry for Sunday 30 October 1870, we read: "Marshal Bazaine has turned traitor!!!"

Her second child was a daughter, Germaine, who was born in August 1873 in the "country house" in Neuilly where her mother spent the summer.

The whole family lived in the new *quartiers* that had been set up by Baron Haussmann: Aristide Moreau-Chaslon at 98 *bis*, Boulevard Haussmann, and Victor Augustin Grimprel, Eugène Roussel's brother-in-law and friend, a state councillor and head of the income-tax office, at number 97, then number 121 of the same boulevard. The building situated at 25, Boulevard Malesherbes (five floors plus attic), where Raymond Roussel was born, belonged to his maternal grandparents. Aristide Moreau-Chaslon had died on 12 July 1869, and Thaïs, Raymond's grandmother, had died just over three months previously on 3 October 1876. She bequeathed her entire inheritance to her three children: Alix, Victor Grimprel's wife; Georges, who lived at 45, Rue de Chazelles; and Marguerite Roussel. On 9 March 1877, the Grimprels, Georges Moreau-Chaslon and Raymond Roussel's parents shared out this inheritance in the presence of a notary, Maître Le Villaire. The Neuilly property went to Marguerite Roussel.

THE NEUILLY "COUNTRY HOUSE"

Roussel with his wet-nurse, Madeleine Guyot-Bussiére.



This "country house" at 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, the old Boulevard de Madrid (also known as Boulevard de Bagatelle), was situated near Parc de Bagatelle (the private property of Sir Richard Wallace, later to be purchased by the city of Paris in 1905), and separated from the park only by the boulevard and the Route du Champ-d'Entraînement. It was to play an important role in the life of Raymond Roussel, for he spent part of his childhood there and inherited it in 1911 upon the death of his mother.

This vast property had been acquired gradually by Aristide Moreau-Chaslon after an initial purchase in 1857 of a lot of 9380 square metres. It included domestic buildings as well as an estate, to which four further parcels of land were added over time, though 1400 square metres of this were cut off and sold in 1861. Its total surface area was 11,419.13 square metres precisely, according to the deeds, with a façade on Boulevard Richard-Wallace measuring 107.23 metres, situated to the right of the "Château de Madrid". It included a red-brick "Norman Villa" with two full

floors plus a third floor under the gables, which is featured in photographs and private postcards, a concierge's lodge on the boulevard, greenhouses, an orangery, outhouses, a shed, a garage, stables, gardens and a tennis court.

The area between the Bois de Boulogne, the Avenue de Neuilly and the Seine is almost completely covered by villas, parks and gardens which are, for the most part, closed during winter and inhabited only during the summer.*

The current map of the Bois de Boulogne allows us to locate this estate in the Madrid *quartier*, bounded by Boulevard du Commandant-Charcot, Rue de la Ferme, Rue de Longchamp and Boulevard Richard-Wallace, leading down to the Pont de Puteaux.

This *quartier* is so called after the Château de Madrid, built by François I after his return from captivity in Spain (the Treaty of Madrid, 1526), sold off as national property to a demolition company in 1792, but finally pulled down only under the Second Empire after its orangery had become the restaurant in which the Prince-President Louis Napoleon and the Duc de Morny prepared their *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851. At the corner where the two boulevards met at the Porte de Madrid cross-roads, part of the hotel-restaurant built there in 1906 can still be seen, bearing crests and salamanders reminiscent of the victory statues in "the Belle Ferronnière".†

The Bois de Boulogne is adjacent, as are Lac Saint-James, the Pigeon-Shooting Ground, the stables and riding-schools of the Paris Horse-Riding Association; the Jardin d'Acclimatation is also nearby. Unlike the Bois de Vincennes, in the second part of *Les Noces*, the Bois de Boulogne does not seem to have inspired Raymond Roussel very much. The third act of *The Seine* is set in "an avenue of the Bois de Boulogne", but could be anywhere: "front of stage, a wide track; at the back, a small footpath, parallel to the track. Grass between pavement and path. A bench on the track." Plus a tree, which Roussel forgets to mention, on which Raoul and Jeanne engrave their intertwined initials. Nothing more.

During the 1860s, the "American Railroad", a horse-drawn coach on rails, and then, in the 1880s, tram-line number 35 connected Porte Maillot with Val d'Or (in Saint-Cloud), going via Boulevard Maillot (now, in part, Boulevard Maurice-Barrès), Boulevard du Nord (later Avenue de Madrid, then in part Boulevard Richard-Wallace, and later still Boulevard du Commandant-Charcot), turning at the Porte de Madrid cross-roads, going up Boulevard Richard-Wallace and passing in front of number 25.

In 1857, when acquiring his Neuilly property, Aristide Moreau-Chaslou also gained the right of access from the city of Paris (which owned the Bois de Boulogne) to go "on foot or by carriage" via the "Boulevard du Nord". On the other hand, he



The three Roussel children, Georges, Raymond and Germaine.

* Guide Joanne, *Paris illustré*, 1867.

† To the north of the Madrid *quartier*, the Saint-James *quartier* includes the site of the Château and of the Parc Saint-James and, from 1844 to 1920, accommodated an asylum founded by Dr Casimir Pinel, son of the famous alienist Philippe Pinel. Toulouse-Lautrec was confined there in March 1899.

was not permitted to put up any construction within ten metres of the railings and undertook instead to cultivate an ornamental garden there. These railings, with their regulation city of Paris design which can still be found throughout the Saint-James *quartier*, even though it has been entirely sold off, are all that is now left of the Roussel estate, apart from a few large, sweet-chestnut trees which the levelling-off of the lawns between today's residences has elevated thanks to the natural mounds formed by their roots.

In 1883, the Roussel family moved away from the house on Boulevard Malesherbes where Raymond was born and into a large and luxurious mansion, which has since been demolished, near the Champs-Élysées at number 50, Rue de Chaillot.*

DELICIOUS MEMORIES

I have delicious memories of my childhood. I can affirm that I experienced at that time several years of perfect happiness.†

* Previously number 96, rue de Chaillot, number 50 was to become, in 1919, number 20, Rue Quentin-Bauchart after that part of the street then contained between Avenue Marceau and the Champs-Élysées was separated off. On Rue de Chaillot, Madame Roussel was to have the Duchesse de Gramont as her neighbour at number 52.

Maurice Quentin-Bauchart (1857-1910) deserved to have a Paris street named after him. He was a town councillor for the Champs-Élysées *quartier* from 1890 onwards, a writer, the author of novels and essays, vice-president of the Société des Gens de Lettres from 1906 to 1908, and bequeathed his collection of Parisian art to the Musée Carnavalet.

† *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Most of Roussel's autobiographical references come from this posthumous work.

‡ Remarks published in the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie française*, Kra, 1927. Roussel thanked Soupault by dedicating a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* to him.

Roussel was chary of making confidences, but this one can certainly be believed. Yet, according to Philippe Soupault: "He had a quiet childhood, too quiet perhaps. At first all he had were his toys, those mechanical toys whose cogs he would patiently take to pieces [?]. There was much toing and froing around him. From his bedroom he could hear the distant echo of parties."‡ This should not be credited, for the photographs of Roussel in fancy-dress and, above all, his mother's diaries prove that he was present at these parties. Whenever she went out, she would always specify whether "with children" or without.

When Raymond was seven, in January 1884, his mother took him to see *Peau-d'Âne*. Then, when he was eight, in November 1885, they saw *Tom Thumb*. In 1886, the children went to the Opéra-Comique in January, then in June to L'Éden (a popular musical-hall, despite which the critic Francisque Sarcey spoke very highly of Polin, a comic trouser who appeared there that year), and in December back to the Opéra-Comique. When he was ten, Raymond went with his brother and sister to the Opéra in March, then to the Opéra-Comique in April and May. 1889 (the year of the Universal Exposition, when Raymond was twelve) was a big year: on 21 April, Raymond and Georges saw *Riquet à la Houppe*; on 22 June, they went to the circus; on 29 June, Mme Roussel wrote of dining in the restaurant of the recently constructed Eiffel Tower "with Georges, Ray and André [?]" ; on 5 July, going to the Opéra "with Ger[maine], Ray and Brinquant [?]" ; on 20 July, to see *Prince Soleil* "with children and Tachar [?]" ; and on 27 September, to the Opéra "with children and Admiral [Layrle, perhaps?]" .

As for the “children’s plays” and costumed *soirées* which Mme Roussel organised in Rue Chaillot, Raymond naturally took part in them. He was ten when his mother’s diary informs us that, on 23 January 1887, he acted in a “children’s play at Ernesta’s [?]”; and on 24 March, in an otherwise unspecified “children’s play”. He was almost eleven when, on 12 January 1888, the children put on two of Labiche’s plays at Rue Chaillot (*La Fille bien gardée* and *Embrassons-nous, Folleville*) at nine o’clock precisely, with programmes designed by Georges Roussel — the artist was nearly nineteen. In May 1890 Raymond was thirteen (his sister sixteen and brother twenty-one) when, on the 21st, his mother noted a “dress rehearsal”, then on the 23rd a “full dress-rehearsal” and on the 24th the “first performance of children’s play”.

In the twenty or so small diaries (most of which were bound by Gruel) that have come down to us, Mme Roussel recorded in her large angular handwriting, like strokes of a whip, the episodes of her life in high society: letters received, the names of friends and guests at her dinners, opera titles, appointments at famous dressmakers, (Worth, Doucet, Redfern, etc.), house management, gifts of money to the children, to friends, to servants, donations to the church and the poor, and her state of health with, when appropriate, the frequency of baths and the quantities of spa water taken during her health cures. Unfortunately, however, with neither precision nor regularity: relying too closely on these diaries means running the risk of missing out on important events or, on the other hand, of exaggerating the significance of more trivial relationships and occurrences. Marguerite Roussel’s main preoccupation was herself. For example, she failed to make any mention of the start of her son’s literary career.

These diaries thus allow us to follow most of Marguerite Roussel’s movements and stays in the country, her cures in spa towns, winters spent in Monte Carlo (a suite in the Hôtel de Paris, no less), summers in Dinard in Brittany, in Dieppe in Normandy, or at the Hôtel Pupp in Carlsbad (then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic), and autumns in Biarritz. Her children, of course, went with her. We also know, this time thanks to Michel Leiris, that “certain places which were associated with particularly happy childhood memories became taboo for him”, with Raymond not even wanting to pass through them on the train: Aix-les-Bains, Luchon and St. Moritz were “towns to which he never wanted to return, for fear of



"Me and my children" (see over-leaf).

spoiling his memories".* There were also holidays on the Atlantic coast, at Pornichet for example, "a little Breton village situated by the sea, not far from Saint-Nazaire".†

As in all bourgeois families, Mme Roussel never missed out on an opportunity to take her children to the photographer's, to Benque's or Otto's. She had several copies of the photographs made, intended for her friends, which she put into white envelopes writing on them in pencil: "Me standing in a veil", "Group with Germaine and me", "Me and Ray", "Me and Ger". Me, always me. Marguerite Roussel's narcissism displayed itself every time she held a pen or pencil. In all the photographs in which she features, those around her, be they her children, friends or lady's companions, seem to be there as a supporting cast to put her in the limelight.

It was certainly Raymond, the youngest, who was photographed the most during his childhood. His mother played at dressing him up in a huge variety of costumes. When not in the arms of his nanny, Madeleine Guyot-Bussière, or in skirts, as it was then customary to dress little boys, he can be seen in the family albums as "Perrette and the milk pail", as a little court-priest, as a Neapolitan bandit, as an operatic soldier, as a young marquis, and the list goes on. In 1886, when he was nine, his mother commissioned René Rozet to sculpt a bust of him. Two of the most curious photographs from this period show a dreamy-eyed, chubby-cheeked Raymond at the age of about three sitting astride a white swan, which would not look out of place on a lake by the Neuschwanstein Castle. Raymond Roussel does not seem to have kept this habit of dressing up, except when he took the role of a sailor in his play *Impressions d'Afrique* in 1912. He simply wore a beret in Biarritz or, when passing through Berchtesgaden, posed as "a miner" with a lamp in his hand in front of a painted backdrop in a photographer's studio. And yet there are disguises, costumes and fancy-dress galore in his writings: the dominoes in *La Doublure* and the actors in the Gala of the Incomparables, such as King Yaour IX, "in the classic costume of Margarita in *Faust*", are all familiar to his readers.‡ This gallery of portraits must now be completed by a recently unearthed character: Brigadier Bridier, known as Bistouri ["lancet"] whose appearances in the third part of *Les Noces*, "*À l'Ambigu*", occur at vital moments in the plot's development. As a chess-player, hot-chestnut seller and adventurer, he also stands for Raymond Roussel's pronounced liking from a very young age for *tableaux vivants*, fun-fair shows, carnival parades and costume balls.

What is surprising in this collection of family portraits is the absence of photographs of baptisms and communions. The Roussel children took their first communion, as tradition dictated — Georges on 29 April 1880, his sister Germaine on 30 April 1885, and Raymond on 7 May 1888 — but religion does not seem to have played a very large part in their daily lives. When the poet Jean Chatard asked Michel Ney [Roussel's nephew] if Roussel believed in God, he answered:

* Both quotations from Michel Leiris, *Roussel l'ingénu*.

† *Nanon*.

‡ *Impressions of Africa*.



Roussel in costume. Top row: soldier; court-priest; brigand; marquis. Left: aged three on a swan; above: as a miner at Berchtesgaden.

I don't know, I cannot tell you... For example, I never knew if he did or did not go to mass... I know nothing about all that, he never spoke to me about it... On Sundays he often used to pretend [?] to go to mass, but now... that does not mean that he really did go... At least, not in my opinion, do you see?

And when he travelled to Palestine, it was not a pilgrimage — unless, that is, it was a pilgrimage honouring Pierre Loti (whose *La Galilée* was published in 1894) — but rather as an interested tourist looking for traces of the naïve imagery of catechism and the “Holy Story”.

Raymond Roussel must have resembled the child he was later to describe in *The View*:

A boy overflowing with heedlessness,
Who has never felt vicious heartlessness
Weigh on him, self-assured in love and spoiled
By the gifts he has, and by that unsoiled
Beauty, whose charm wafts wherever he goes;
No one polices him at all, he knows
He can trust in his strangely powerful air,
In the sure spell woven by his dark stare;
When he shows himself, he feels in advance,
With strangers met in any circumstance,
That he'll be the moment's hero, beguile
Them and, with little effort, win a smile;
The world seems gold to him, he hasn't met
Evil or begun to learn how to fret
From worry; he's radiant and joyful.*

It would also seem that a poetic vocation had already emerged in the child when we read a small poem, of six quatrains of approximate pentameters, addressed to his mother on 20 February 1882:

Tender warden of my young existence
Blessed angel watching my life,
You, whose heart is brimming with love immense,
Have always kept me far from strife...

But it must be said that presumably someone helped him (or even that he copied out his poem from an anthology of versified “Compliments”), because Raymond Roussel was then only five years old...

It is fairly certain that the allusions to childhood in Roussel's works refer to his own, and they clearly proliferate towards the end of his life, particularly in *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. At that time, in 1932, he preferred to have the portrait

* Translations of Roussel's works quoted here are by Ian Monk unless indicated otherwise.

which Madeleine Lemaire* painted of him as a child published in the press, rather than a picture of a fifty-year-old man.

"I was brought up by my sister Germaine", Roussel tells us. She was four years older than him and must have drawn him into her girlish games, while herself remaining aloof from those of her elder brother. "Our brother Georges... was already nearly a young man while we were still children." There was, in fact, an eight-year gap between Georges and Raymond.

There is some record of certain of the Roussel children's games. For example, when Raymond told Dr Pierre Janet, who duly took note: "We shall find out all my childhood deeds and admire the way I would play at prisoners' base," he is not merely referring to the *image d'Épinal* of the young Napoleon Bonaparte at Brienne, he is perhaps also indicating that the roots of his literary genius are to be found in his childhood games. In *The Seinc*, Raoul, who often appears to be Roussel's mouth-piece, remembers (lines 5306-10):

That was the time I played at prisoners' base,
When I would get up with bloodied knees from
Countless falls; alas, when do we fathom
More about the deep mystery of life
Than at that time?

He learnt the same nursery rhymes as other children, *J'ai du bon tabac* and *Au clair de la lune*, which he later used in his procedure in *Impressions d'Afrique* as follows: *J'ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière* [I have good tobacco in my tobacco pouch] became *Jade tube onde aubade en mat à basse tierce* [Jade tube wave aubade in matt at a lower third], and *Au clair de la lune mon ami Pierrot* [In the moonlight, my friend Pierrot] became *Eau glaire de l'anémone à midi négro* [Egg-white water of the anemone at a negro's noon]. These games with similar-sounding words are reminiscent of the rebuses, charades and puzzles children play with. Some jigsaw puzzles may take the form of a collection of cubes, such as the one to be found in *La Poussière de Soleils*, and it is just this children's game which should be seen in the use Roussel makes of it, rather than the "image of quintessence" which André Breton thought he discerned.

There are also card games, and Roussel seems to have enjoyed playing patience:

JEANNE

It is extraordinary the pains I am taking
With myself, trying to reach that seven,
When I need just place this here... How even
And clear it is. Aren't I being silly...

RAOUL

No! You need to have brains of quality

* Madeleine Coll (1845-1928), the wife of the sculptor Hector Lemaire and whose name appears frequently in Marguerite Roussel's diaries, is most famous for her watercolours of flowers (she was nicknamed the "Empress of Roses") and for having illustrated in 1896 Marcel Proust's *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*; she also illustrated Roussel's *La Vue* in the *Gaulois du Dimanche* in 1903. Roussel's dedications to her pay witness to his friendship and admiration, as for example these words on a copy on Japanese vellum of *L'Étoile au Front*: "to Madeleine Lemaire, whose works I love to admire at length, petal by petal, leaf by leaf..."

It was at her house, 31, Rue de Monceau, during the musical evenings she held there, that Roussel must have met Frédéric de Madrazo, or "Coco", the friend of Proust and Reynaldo Hahn, part painter, part composer and part singer, the model for the sculptor Ski in *Swann's Way*, to whom Roussel, "his very old friend", dedicated a copy of *Locus Solus* which was later to belong to Raymond Queneau, and a copy of *L'Étoile au Front* "in memory of the remarkable performance in which I heard him with Hortense Schneider" (died in 1920 at the age of ninety-seven). After the death of Marguerite Roussel, Frédéric de Madrazo sent his condolences to his "dear Raymond".

Madeleine Lemaire's portrait of Roussel is reproduced on p.316

To permute it all at once!

JEANNE

That skill
Is acquired from practice.

RAOUL

I think this will
Come out presently.

JEANNE

Yes, I think so too,
With patience.*

The Roussels' villa was near the fun-fair, the famous "*Fête à Neu-Neu*" which takes place every summer on Avenue de Neuilly (now Avenue du Général de Gaulle). On 2 July 1879, Mme Roussel noted in her diary: "Neuilly Fair, children 3 francs." And it was here that Raymond must one day have been bought the "Pharaoh's serpent" referred to in chapter five of *Locus Solus* and which is in fact made of sulphocyanide of mercury, an ingredient of... "Père La Colique"'s black puddings!

We also know that the children acted in plays in Mme Roussel's salons;† but these were certainly not always plays from the repertory, and must have included simple charades. It may be useful to point out the rules of this game in France. For example: it is announced that there will be two acts plus a conclusion. First act: the children mime out a Highland dance. Second act: carpenters are cutting wood. Conclusion: the children scratch their heads while pretending to assemble the parts of a puzzle. The answer is "jig-saw". Charades are not just a pastime for children. In 1901, Arsène Arüss published a whole book about *Charades* (Ollendorff). "This humble offshoot of the dramatic arts," says the writer, should be played in such a way that each syllable of the word to be found is "not only mimed but also *spoken, pronounced* out loud, but without of course being emphasised." The examples he gives provide an idea of the level of these high-society parlour games: *Auberge* (*Eau-Berge*), *Rapin* (*Rat-Pain*), *Souci* (*Sou-Si*), *Moka* (*Mot-Cas*), etc. A further example: two little girls dressed as Hindus have a symbol on their foreheads; we are obviously in the theatre because they are twins [in French, *jumelles* means "twin girls" as well as "opera glasses"]; they have a "star on the forehead", as is stated at the end of the play with the same name; etc. The conclusion...? The entirety of chapter five of *Impressions d'Afrique* is made up of *tableaux vivants* presented by Carmichael (the feast of the Olympian gods; Ursula, accompanied by Maffa the Huron, giving her assistance to the bewitched of Lake Ontario; Handel mechanically composing the theme of his oratorio *Vesper*, etc.) which are veritable charades in action. In chapter seven, Seil-Kor is also reminiscent of a "charades' master". The sources of Roussel's plays should be looked for in these

* *The Seine*.

† This tradition was to be upheld by Raymond's sister Germaine. There are photographs of Michel Ney, Germaine's son, the children of the Vicomtesse de Jonghe, Louis de Langlade, Simone Stern, etc. performing Tristan Bernard's *L'Anglais tel qu'on le parle* during the summer of 1918 in the La Rochefoucaulds' house at Biarritz.

parlour games.

Michel Leiris remarked on Roussel's childish taste for sweet things, his mania for established reputations, guide-book marvels and aristocratic names, his obsession with ageing and death, his nostalgia for his earliest childhood, "and that inescapable anxiety which gripped him not only when in a tunnel".* However, Raymond Roussel never revealed the true secret of his childhood happiness. It is clearly no coincidence that he fixed the date of the revolution in Belotina as 1877, the year of his birth. Nor is it a complete coincidence that he included the date of 30 September 1887 (a Friday) in *Locus Solus*: on that day, Vascody learnt of the death of the Count of Ruolz, but left his old friend the rolls of extendible metallic lace, and "each day blessed the memory of Ruolz, without whom his old age would have been mere privation and torment." Now, among the gallery of imaginary characters in *Locus Solus*, Ruolz really existed. After starting out as a musician, he became famous by patenting numerous inventions, in particular the techniques for gold- and silver-plating which he left to Christophle. He lived in Paris (29, Rue Saint-Guillaume), but it was in Neuilly (2, Rue d'Orléans) that the Comte de Ruolz-Montchal was to die at the age of eighty on 30 September 1887, at nine o'clock in the evening. Should we go on believing Raymond Roussel when he tells us that, for him, "imagination is everything"? Or should we accept that reality, too, sometimes puts in strange appearances?

But, soon:

... his presence
Sets him at the end of adolescence;
His ambition grows, with horizons such
That romping games now don't amuse him much;
His heightened insights of unguessed-at strands,
Vague feelings that he scarcely understands,
In sketched dreams; his spirit wants to wrestle
With a larger target, win its mettle
Test itself, adventure out, bridle up
But fails...†

It has often been supposed that Roussel had a "Proustian" childhood, and this is quite correct. He literally lived in the skirts of his darling mother. In her letter of 8 October 1902, she is perfectly serious when replying to one of his letters, with which he had enclosed a series of caricatures of monkeys, saying that one of them reminded him of himself:

... I feel indignant that you should claim to have sent me your portrait in *La Lecture*:‡ I do not want you to belittle my creation in this way, on the contrary, everyone agrees that I have produced a physical and moral masterpiece (apart from a few cranky ideas which have now practically disappeared). So, no more unpleasant jokes about my little darling, to whom I have raised an altar in my heart from which I do not wish him to be removed.

* *Roussel l'ingénu*, p.31.

† *The View*.

‡ A magazine of the period.
[Trans.]

Raymond Roussel was already twenty-five when he and his mother teased each other in this way. What were these “cranky ideas”? That he once believed in his own genius? Did she not know of the thousands of lines of poetry her son had written? This time we should perhaps give credence to Philippe Soupault, when he says:

As a young man, life for him was easy. Or, so it appeared. He frequented the literary salons of the period, went to the most brilliant and elegant parties. Slowly he started to write. He hid what he was doing.

MARGUERITE ROUSSEL AND HER FRIENDS

* Marguerite Moreau-Chaslon, daughter of Aristide Moreau-Chaslon and Thais Hortense Chaslon, was born in Paris on 18 February 1847. (Since records were destroyed when the Town Hall was burnt down in 1871, her birth certificate was reconstructed by Maître Ducloux, a notary at 9, Rue Boissy-d'Anglas, on 5 September 1874, from her marriage certificate; archives of the Seine Département.)

† *Op.cit.*

‡ All quotations here from *La Source*.

§ Robert Desnos, in “*Une Vie excentrique, Raymond Roussel le mystérieux*”, embellishes this anecdote somewhat. As her diaries attest, Mme Roussel’s readings were not limited to this one book. Marguerite Roussel above all read recently published novels, most of whose authors have now been forgotten, just as today’s ones will be: Victor Cherbuliez, Octave Feuillet, Ernest Daudet, Oscar Méténier, Édouard Noël, Henry Gréville, Léon de Tinseau, Georges Ohnet, Michel Jacquemin, Gyp, Maurice Leblanc, Jean Blaize, Jean Aicard, René Bazin, and many others besides no doubt, as too Dr Mardrus’s translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, a few history books and, oddly enough, Octave Noël’s *Le Socialisme et la question sociale* and, in particular, Séverine’s *Pages rouges*.

Marguerite Roussel was, according to those who knew her, “imperious”, beautiful, severe and majestic. Photographs of her confirm this. She was almost thirty when Raymond was born.* He was thirty-four when she died at the age of sixty-four, having scarcely ever left her side. “Beset with jewels, reigning over her salon, a cantankerous woman who made R.R. suffer,”† noted Michel Leiris.

It is difficult to resist identifying her with this woman, described in *The Source*:

a tall woman

Has majestic haughtiness in her stance
With prudent coldness in her appearance;
She has, good for her, a high opinion
Of herself, and is belittled by none.
She thinks that she knows almost everything;
and scorns the unread, as a blue stocking...

But this must be seen as an anti-portrait: in Raymond’s eyes, this blue stocking was not his mother. And if Mme Roussel did “lay down the law when it came to literature”, then it was because she was right. Her letters “without a dull word, without erasures” are spontaneous and not “the product of laborious drafts / From which industrious turns of phrase emerge”. She surrounded herself with renowned writers and not with “scribblers”. She read with discernment rather than “stuffing herself with novels”. And it was certainly not she who “produced” lines of verse!‡

Judging by her diaries, Mme Roussel entertained a great deal. But the names she noted down seem insufficient: there were certainly more than two or three people at her table. Did she want to remember only those names that most flattered the reputation of her board, or else only those of her favourites? Once dinner was over, she brought the guests into her salon where, as Jacques Doucet confirms, a lady’s companion dressed in black read out passages from Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* until midnight or one o’clock in the morning.§ Did she really enjoy surrounding herself with writers? She knew Paul Bourget and, above all, Louis

Ganderax (1855-1940), the theatre critic at the *Revuc des Deux-Mondes*, and later literary director of the *Revue de Paris*.*

When the children were not acting, they danced. Raymond's mother had him take lessons and, in *The Seine*, he displayed his knowledge:

JEANNE (*watching a couple dance*)
Look, how pretty is that continuous
Undulation, and how gracious; in fact
They both dance very well [...]

RAOUL (*answering Jeanne*)
It is the
German style, regular, rounded pacing,
Sliding the feet without lifting them.

But, above all, Mme Roussel adored music and musicians. She was a friend of Albert Carré, who succeeded Carvalho as director of the Opéra-Comique in 1898, and she had a subscription at the Opéra (on Fridays), with both an upper box and a *baignoire*, just as she also had her own box at the Théâtre-Français. At her house on Rue Chaillot, she entertained her close friend Rose Caron, the star of Wagner's operas, who gave her a signed photograph and whom Raymond Roussel did not overlook when signing copies of *Locus Solus*:

To Madame Rose Caron, to whom I owe my purest and deepest artistic sensations, as a token of my respectful enthusiasm...

and, in April 1925, for *L'Étoile au Front*:

To Madame Rose Caron, peerless Priestess of Art, respectfully offered with enthusiasm.†

Rose Caron was pampered by Marguerite Roussel. In 1902, she received a new-year's gift of a ring, a diamond surrounded by rubies, worth 3000 francs; and in 1903, a suite of Louis XV furniture. When Marguerite Roussel was away travelling during this period, she wrote to Rose Caron every day.

Mme Roussel was also a benefactor of the singer Edmond Clément and, in order to be closer to him, adopted his brother as her doctor. As for Georges Féodoroff, we know from a book that Roussel dedicated to him that their friendship was "exactly as old as this old book, published in 1897" (*La Doublure*); and, on a copy of *Locus Solus*, he wrote: "How happy Lucien Egroisard would be if he had the chance to reproduce Georges Féodoroff's admirable voice with the help of his process!"

In one of the photographs of Mme Roussel's salon, a harp can clearly be seen. But did she play it herself, or was it there only for show? In any case, in the same set of

* Mme Ganderax, known as "Ninette", born Nina Vimercati, daughter of Count Ottaviano, a diplomat representing Cavour at the court of Napoleon III, was a friend of Mme Roussel's; divorced from Alexandre de Girardin, it was she who drew her second husband, Louis Ganderax, to Mme Roussel's salon in 1888. (Philippe G. Kerbellec, *Who's Who*) During this long friendship (their names appear in Mme Roussel's diaries from 1884 up until 1905), Ganderax inherited in 1897 the fortune of Henri Meilhac, whose intimate friend he had become.

Robert de Montesquiou could not resist saying:

*The family Ganderax
Has blossomed like anthrax.*

Raymond Roussel's dedications are pure hyperbole:

"To my dear Louis Ganderax, at whose house in Montmorency I spent a splendid day, thanks to his marvellous wit, which I remember being so unlike the rather dull day described in this book."

(*Locus Solus*)

"To the wittiest man of all the centuries."

(*L'Étoile au Front*)

"Compared to whom all the past, present and future wits are mere 'dust'."

(*La Poussière de Soleils*)

"To the man whose every word I should have written down and published to avoid committing an outrage to posterity."

(*Pages Choiesies*)

† Bibliothèque Jacques Matarasso, Drouot, 28 April 1994. *Cahier de dédicaces*, folio 14.

photographs (and in the auction catalogue after her death) can be seen the works of fashionable painters: her friend Madeleine Lemaire, whose portrait of Raymond as a child has already been referred to; and Eugène Lami (1800-1890), of whom she possessed eight watercolours.

When widowed, Mme Roussel inherited an income of two million francs-or, which she spent recklessly: for example, from Wildenstein she bought a little antique table for the miserly sum of 75,000 francs-or, and a suite of salon furniture which had belonged to Comte Boni de Castellane and figured in the retrospective of French art at the Petit Palais during the Universal Exposition of 1900.* She entertained lavishly in her mansion on Rue de Chaillot, where four silent footmen emerged from the shadows to serve the guests, before disappearing again as they had appeared, without there being any need to call or ring for them. A lift, which was a veritable little boudoir decked out with different sorts of precious wood, led up to the second floor where Raymond Roussel lived. Each member of the family had his or her own floor and separate suite of rooms, and their own servants, horses and carriage, lodged in the buildings of the inner courtyard.

It was also in about 1900 that Mme Roussel had a dress made by Worth, 7, Rue de la Paix, and then had herself photographed by Bary in front of a mirror in her beautiful dress and magnificent pearl necklace. It is also said that she was a morphine addict; but this is probably mere gossip, originating from a treatment to ease pain during her last illness.

Roger Vitrac† seems to be behind various tales that were told about her: "Having decided to visit India, Mme Roussel acquired a yacht and set sail. The voyage was a pleasant one and the boat was just coming into port when the rich traveller requested a spyglass: 'So that is India!' she cried. 'Captain, we are returning to France!'" It is also stated that the yacht (it was an ocean steamer) left from Cannes (untrue), that Mme Roussel had taken a good ten friends with her, then fell out with them during the voyage (untrue), and in 1926 her cook was to tell the young André Guillot, who loved to repeat the story, that he had been as far as India but had never set foot there, though once again this is in fact untrue... As for Michel Leiris, he believed that Mme Roussel curtailed



* *Catalogue de la vente Roussel*, 1912 (cat. no. 261).

† Roger Vitrac, "Raymond Roussel".

this voyage long before reaching the coast of India and that she contented herself by visiting Egypt with her son between 1900 and 1910. Dr Clément's children remembered that their father, who suffered from sea-sickness, had to turn down her invitation and that Mme Roussel was so obsessed by the thought of dying that she took her coffin with her; but that was during another voyage.

What is certainly true is that if there was one "eccentric" in the family, then it was the mother rather than the son: Raymond Roussel's lifestyle merely followed the path she had already mapped out.

FROM JANSON-DE-SAILLY TO THE CONSERVATOIRE

Before any travels, either with or without his mother, little Raymond entered Lycée Janson-de-Sailly, on Rue de la Pompe in the sixteenth *arrondissement*, in 1886 at the age of nine. His talents do not seem to have been particularly well appreciated there: "The principal factor in Roussel's rather grey *cursus honorum* is his praiseworthy aptitude not to upset anybody during his rare periods of attendance."* At the end of the first semester of the 1886-7 school year, M. Henry, his class teacher, severely criticised Raymond's Latin unseen translations for his "faulty knowledge of French". During the second term, he predicted: "Weak pupil, will be a failure." During the first term of 1888-9, M. Bourrioux, his Latin/French and history/geography teacher, was more indulgent with him: "Very weak, but desires to do better." M. de Uffalri, another teacher during the same period, said of him: "Good disposition, but timorous." M. Bourrioux nevertheless admitted that "he continues to work and is making progress" during the second term, thanks in large degree to his "invariable good bearing and conduct." But Raymond Roussel was to leave Janson-de-Sailly in 1890-1 having reached only the fourth year. Here is the version he was to give of this abandonment of traditional schooling:

My mother adored music and, finding that I had a gift for this art, made me leave school at thirteen for the *Conservatoire*, after having triumphed over my father's half-hearted resistance.

Perhaps his mother's main reason was that she did not consider that his teachers were worthy of her son? She provided him with more understanding tutors at home: A. Barthès (a former schoolmaster, if we are to believe a letter of January 1912) and Mariaud who gave him private mathematics lessons. He must have been about fifteen or sixteen years old when he wrote to his mother, who was away from Paris:

* P. Kerbellec and F. Vergne, "Enquête".

Tuesday

My dear mother,

Today I received visits from Mlle Rollet and from Georges at the same time. Mlle Rollet told me that you were in fairly good health except for some stomach pains; please do give me more information about this matter in your next letter.

After they had left, I set to work with Mariaud and *discovered* a theorem; an absolutely new theorem; from now on, there will be a Roussel's Theorem in mathematics lessons. Mariaud was astonished. It is a theorem about the transformation of periodic fractions into decimal fractions. This is it:

Roussel's Theorem

Any number which is prime or made up of primes except for 2 and 5 is such that when multiplied by a given number n the product is always divisible by 9.

Beautiful, don't you think!

I received a charming letter from Madame Guinon.

Wednesday morning

I have just received your letter and see from it that happily you are being well looked after by absolutely charming people. But now it is I who am going to be the one to accuse you of not telling me everything, for you have said nothing about your stomach pains. Please do inform me when next you write.

A thousand affectionate kisses,

Raymond.

Thus, from his youth, Roussel wished to have his name associated with an invention, a theorem, a formula or procedure. This "Roussel's Theorem" puts us most in mind of the fact that he loved mathematical games and curiosities. For example, in *The Seine* (ll.626-30), two characters express their astonishment at the power of cubed numbers:

CAILLOL

The number

Obtained has at least twenty digits, see?

CHENEL

How strange that, simply multiplied by three,
It increases so quickly and so high.

CAILLOL

At first, it is unbelievable.

Later (l.1700), another snatch of dialogue refers to a similar curiosity:

POISIGNON (*to Féncux*)

That would give an extremely small number:
Zero, point, then after that a whole hoard
Of zeros, ending with "one".

As for Raymond's resistance, there was certainly good reason for it. When the

eldest son, Georges, had finished his national service in the 25th Regiment of Dragoons, he started to display tastes for the arts and high-living which seemed to preclude his following his father's career. And Raymond's dropping out of school and joining the *Conservatoire* may have flattered the mother, but it certainly did not suit the stockbroker. But would this son have been any better equipped as a businessman than his elder brother? After reading *Impressions of Africa* this seems doubtful: the preparations for the show to be put on by the Club of Incomparables gives Juillard the idea of "making shareholders of all the members of the Club and setting up a game of chance, the jackpot of which would be indicated by the future holder of the sash" of the Order of the Delta. Fifty passengers of the *Lynceus* put together a kitty and, in exchange, receive a set of shares which have been "thoroughly shuffled like playing-cards", that is to say, without being able to choose what they are buying. "At the end of the gala, the ten thousand francs would be divided between the shareholders with an interest in the victorious bearer of the supreme insignia of the Delta; until then, the value of the shares could fluctuate considerably, according to the apparent chances of each of the competitors."

This was how Roussel saw the stock-market: as a game of chance. And so Chènevillot the architect constructs "a miniature stock-exchange, an exact scale model of the one in Paris" where Eugène Roussel was regularly to be seen; two bankers and their three clerks act out his role as a stockbroker. Then, as an allusion to his son Raymond's literary tastes, it is decided that orders must be written in hexameters.

Eugène Roussel, too, was rather an eccentric and fashionable figure, but "he didn't count for much in the family".* Other brokers at the stock-exchange said of him that he was "jammy". He was a member of the Cercle des Chemins de Fer, 22, Rue de la Michodière (now the Cercle Haussmann), one of the five great gentlemen's clubs in Paris, along with the Union, the Jockey-Club, the Cercle Agricole and the Union Artistique. It was the club for businessmen and stockbrokers. When he realised that neither of his sons was going to take over his concern, he started looking round for somebody else and discovered a chief clerk, Jacques Sargenton, a regular in Prince Murat's hunting parties and whom he singled out for "his marvellous pearl-grey trousers".

Such was this strange but united family, which was as well to have its share of misfortunes. Between the ages of seventeen and thirty-four, Raymond Roussel was to lose his father in 1894, his first brother-in-law in 1899, his elder brother in 1901 and his mother in 1911.

In accordance with his mother's wishes, he took the entry examination to the *Conservatoire National de Musique* on 5 November 1890 with a Beethoven sonata.† The jury, presided over by Ambroise Thomas, was made up of MM. Delaborde, Alphonse Duvernoy, Fissot, Diémer, de Bériot, Hasselmans and Émile Réty.

* Michel Leiris, *Journal*, 15 August 1961.

† File in the Archives Nationales, discovered by Jean Roy.

Roussel was admitted only as an *auditeur* [a pupil allowed to attend courses, but not otherwise to participate] with the mark “Passable/Weak”. On 17 November, he was enrolled as an *auditeur* in Diémer’s class.

On 9 November 1891, Roussel took the entrance examination again (Chopin’s *Concerto in E Minor*) in front of the same jury with the addition of Th. Dubois. This time he was marked “Not bad/Passable” and was admitted to take piano lessons. In the register of admission to Anthiome’s class, he is noted in red pencil as “not entered”; and in Anthiome’s attendance register for 1891 his admission at the age of fourteen years and eight months is followed by the words “has not entered”. Some of Raymond’s mother’s friends presumably advised her that it would be better for him to work a little longer before attending the *Conservatoire*. Two more years were to pass before he finally started there.

In 1893, his sister Germaine was just nineteen. On 18 April, she married Charles Le Tonnelier, Comte de Breteuil, then aged thirty, at the Town Hall of the eighth *arrondissement*. Born on 4 October 1862 at the Château de Breteuil in Choisel, which overlooks the Chevreuse valley, Charles Marie Joseph Le Tonnelier de Breteuil was the son of Alexandre Charles Marie Joseph Le Tonnelier de Breteuil and Charlotte Amélie Anne Fould.* He had been a member of the Jockey-Club since 1885 and set up home in the Roussel’s mansion at 50, Rue de Chaillot. His elder brother Henri, Marquis de Breteuil (Marcel Proust’s “Marquis de Bréauté”), lived at 10, Avenue du Bois-de-Boulogne and was a friend of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, who stayed at the Château de Breteuil.† It was a wealthy, fashionable, aristocratic family, which had had ministers under the Bourbons and had also been influential during the Empire and the Restoration.

On 31 October of the same year, Raymond Roussel took the entrance examination to the *Conservatoire* once more with Guirand’s *Allegro*. Ambroise Thomas marked his performance thus: “Guirand — All° fine. Good++.” Raymond was unanimously admitted to piano classes and appears as number 39 on the list of would-be piano virtuosos. He was sixteen years and nine months old.

But still the young man was not satisfied. According to him: “At about the age of sixteen [so around 1893], I tried to compose melodies to verses I had written. The verses always came easily, but the music remained troublesome.” All the same, Gertrude says, in *The Seine*:

It is not easy to improvise verse.

None of these little poems seems to have survived, apart from four lines which

in my early youth I amused myself by adding to Victor Hugo’s poem which begins thus:

* A certain Pierre-Louis Roussel, a primary-school teacher, was witness of the birth!

† “You have beginner’s luck,” Gérard said to me. “Do you know who that fellow is with bags under his eyes? Well, it’s the Prince of Wales. He has come to dine with the Marquis de Breteuil.” José Roman (and Raymond Queneau ghosting), *Mes Souvenirs de chasseur de chez Maxim’s*, 1939.

How, the men said
 With our baskets
 Shall we flee the alguazils?
 — Row, the women said.

Here are the four lines which were to conclude the poem:

How, the men said,
 Feeling our wings
 Leaving our vile bodies?
 — Die, the women said.*

Louis Diémer, composer and virtuoso pianist, was nicknamed by Willy the “hundred-handed pianist” (*Rythmes et Rires*, 1894) and by Roussel in a dedication “the giant of the keyboard”. It was said of him that “he never hits a wrong note”. For the centenary celebrations of the *Conservatoire*, *Le Monde musical* published a photograph of Diémer surrounded by his pupils, who include among others Louis Aubert and Raoul Laparra. The seventeen-year-old Raymond Roussel can also be seen (on the far right), still rather chubby in the cheeks, as can Alfred Cortot (1877-1962). The two of them were the same age and were clearly good friends, for Mme Roussel noted Cortot’s address in her diary. Both of them certainly paid visits to their master, who then lived at 82, Rue d’Amsterdam.

Mme Roussel insisted on her son being taken to the *Conservatoire* each day in his own carriage; however, Raymond made his driver park in a nearby street so as not to wound his fellow pupils with such ostentation.

Thursday, 29 March 1894, marked an important event in his parents’ house on Rue de Chaillot, where his sister and her new husband were living: the birth of Robert de Breteuil. The mother was just twenty and the father a lieutenant in the 5th Regiment of Dragoons, stationed at Compiègne.†

Raymond pursued his music studies and, for the examination of 14 June, played Chopin’s *First Ballade*. Louis Diémer’s observations show how much progress he



* Victor Hugo’s poem “Autre guitare” is the 23rd in the series *Les Rayons et les Ombres*. These lines were still in Roussel’s mind when he wrote *Impressions of Africa*, but the “verses” [“vers”] of the “guitar” had become the “worm” [“ver”] which plays the “cithara”. Marcel Prévost also quoted the last line of Victor Hugo’s poem “— Love, the women said.” on the cover and title-page of his *Lettres de Femmes*, published by Lemerre.

† The witnesses were the child’s maternal grandfather, Eugène Roussel, and Arthur O’Connor, aged forty-nine, of independent means, dwelling at 5, Rue François-I^{er}.

had made: "An interesting and distinguished musical nature. Very intelligent and studious." Quite a change from the reports of his masters at Janson-de-Sailly!

The month of July was a hot one. The Roussel family moved out to spend the summer in their country house in Neuilly. On Friday, 6 July, Eugène Roussel was sweating profusely and called for a servant to bring him a glass of chilled champagne. He drained it then promptly collapsed. He was certified dead at half past ten that evening, in the presence of his widow, his children, Charles de Breteuil and Victor Grimpel, who had rushed to his side.* Eugène Roussel was almost sixty-two and had already given up his business. Nevertheless it has been supposed that that glass of champagne was not the only cause of his death. Those who knew him imagined that it was not the first glass of the day, and had been preceded by a large number of cognacs. Eugène Roussel was a regular, heavy drinker.

The inheritance which Eugène Roussel left his widow did not moderate her extravagant lifestyle: Michel Leiris's father, who was in a good position to know, estimated the Roussel family fortune at 40 million francs-or.

We do not know what Marguerite Roussel wrote in her diary that day, for the volume for 1894 has not come down to us. But, on 6 July 1895, the anniversary of her husband's death, she filled the entire page with a large cross.

Raymond Roussel continued his studies at the *Conservatoire*. For the second-year piano examination on 23 January 1895 (Liszt's *Study in D Flat*), Louis Diémer noted: "Excellent pupil, extremely fine musical nature, has made enormous progress." For the third year, on 21 January 1896, he played Saint-Saëns's *Étude en forme de valse* and, for the examination of 17 June, Chopin's *Fantasia in F Minor*. Louis Diémer remarked: "Charmingly elegant qualities." That year, Raymond Roussel won a second-class certificate of merit — so, he should not be believed when he tells us that, at seventeen, he had decided to "give up music."

A SENSATION OF UNIVERSAL GLORY

However, poetry was becoming increasingly important to him. "From that moment on, I started to work feverishly. I laboured almost night and day for several months, by the end of which I had written *La Doublure*, the composition of which coincided with the attack described by Pierre Janet." Roussel had arrived at a crucial moment in his life:

I would here like to mention a strange attack that I had at the age of nineteen, while writing *La Doublure*. For several months I experienced an extraordinarily intense feeling of universal glory. Dr Pierre Janet, who treated me for many years, has described this attack in the first volume of his work *De l'Angoisse à l'Extase* (page 132 and following). In it, he calls me Martial, after Martial Canterel in *Locus Solus*.

* It was these last two who were to go to the Neuilly Town Hall the next day to register the death.

Pierre Janet (1859-1947) was a doctor and psychologist, a pupil of Théodule Ribot and a disciple of Jean-Martin Charcot. His “psychology of behaviour” was based on the “sensation of reality” and the “synthesis of consciousness”, which Freud publicly criticised. He wrote several books, mostly dealing with hysteria and psychasthenia.

Most of the volume in which Roussel is mentioned is concerned with the case of Madeleine, a sufferer of ecstatic trances, whom Janet observed from 1896 to 1904. But Roussel does not say *when* Dr Janet “treated” him. Does the name Martial, taken from *Locus Solus*, refer to the novel that was published in 1914 (that is to say, eighteen years after the initial attack), or to the play that was performed in 1922 (twenty-six years after)?

In 1925, Pierre Janet wrote: “This man, aged forty-five...”; but, in the second volume, which Roussel does not refer to but which also contains observations concerning him, Janet talks of a forty-year-old man and refers to wounded soldiers in military ambulances during the 1914-18 war. We know that Roussel was called up and discharged only in 1918, by which date Janet claims to have already been treating him “for several years”, but without specifying exactly how long.

So, nothing proves that it was Pierre Janet who treated Raymond Roussel in 1897. What is more, Roussel wrote: “The shock even caused some sort of skin disease, which resulted in a rash covering my entire body. My mother had me examined by *our* doctor [Dr Henri Chéron?], thinking that I had measles. But the most lasting after-effect of this attack was a terrible nervous affliction from which I suffered for a long time.” In Dr Janet’s observations, Roussel discusses his attack in a rather detached way: “... some infants become prodigies at the age of eight, I became one when I was nineteen. I *was* equal to Dante and Shakespeare...” There is another clue to the date of the consultations with Dr Janet: “... What do you expect, some shells have a hard time exploding, but when they do!” Does not this metaphor seem more appropriate to a veteran soldier after the First World War, rather than twenty years previously? Finally, in the passage which he reproduces from *Caractères psychologiques de l’extase*, Roussel quotes Henri Bergson’s *L’Énergie spirituelle*, which was published in 1919. He also refers to a stay in a New York hotel during his trip around the world in 1920-1.

Thus, unless he was called in as a specialist, it does not seem likely that Dr Janet witnessed this early attack, which Roussel himself refers to *in the past*. His observations are not related to the attack itself, but to the condition of a forty- to forty-five-year-old patient, the causes of whose illness go back to his youth, more than twenty years before. Raymond Roussel sent copies of his books, signed and printed on Japanese vellum, to Dr Janet, but those that have survived tell us nothing about the dates of the treatment, for they come a long time after *La Doublure* and even after the 1914-18 war: *L’Étoile au Front*, with these words: “To Pierre Janet,

whose every word should be learnt by heart... with my greatest admiration. May 1925"; and *La Poussière de Soleils* in May 1927.*

It was perhaps not a good idea to put Raymond Roussel in Dr Janet's hands. This graduate from *L'École normale* had been a physician and a philosophy teacher in Parisian secondary schools before becoming director of the Pathological Psychology Laboratory at the Salpêtrière. He was not yet forty at the time of Roussel's attack.† Later, he declared that the Surrealists were "obsessives and doubters". In *La Subconscience* he pointed out that he had given a different meaning to the word "subconscious" from that generally used by poets: "It has been used to explain the enthusiasms and prophecies of genius... I refuse to discuss such reassuring theories... I simply point out that I have been dealing with something quite different."

A final point regarding this subject: when Michel Leiris went to see Dr Janet, before publishing the first pages of *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres* in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in April 1935, he took the following notes: "1914-1928, twice a week, then once. Kreuzlingen." This last note is quite correct: it was indeed in 1928 that Raymond Roussel was admitted to Ludwig Binswanger's clinic in Kreuzlingen on the shores of Lake Constance.

In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Raymond Roussel quotes Dr Janet's observations:‡

Martial, a young neuropath, shy, scrupulous, easily depressed, at the age of nineteen experienced a state of mind which he himself describes as being extraordinary. Having become interested in literature, which he preferred to the [musical] studies he had undertaken until then, he started to write a long work in verse, which he wanted to complete before reaching the age of twenty. Since this poem was to contain several thousand lines, he worked hard at it night and day, almost without stopping, and without feeling at all tired. Little by little, he felt a strange enthusiasm engulf him: "You feel, thanks to some particular sign, that you are producing a masterpiece and are a prodigy: some infants become prodigies at the age of eight, I became one when I was nineteen. I was equal to Dante and Shakespeare, I felt what the aged Victor Hugo felt when he was seventy, what Napoleon felt in 1811, what Tannhäuser dreamt in Venusberg: 'I experienced glory... No, glory is not an idea, a notion that you pick up from noticing that your name is on everybody's lips. No, it does not derive from a feeling of your value, from any feeling that you deserve glory. No, since I had never thought about that before, I had no need or desire for glory. But this glory was a fact, a reality, a sensation, I was possessed of glory... What I wrote was surrounded by radiance, I closed the curtains, for I was afraid that the slightest gap might allow the luminous beams that were radiating from my pen to escape outside, I wanted to tear the screen away suddenly and illuminate the world. If I left these papers lying about, they would have sent rays of light as far as China and a bewildered crowd would have burst into the house. But, no matter how many precautions I took, rays of light escaped from me and passed through the walls, I had the sun inside me and could in no way stop that incredible blazing of myself. Each line was repeated in thousands of copies and I was writing with thousands of glittering pen-nibs. Doubtless, when the book was published, that dazzling blaze would be revealed even more and light up the entire universe, but it would not have been created, since I was already carrying it inside myself... At that time, I was in a state of incredible happiness, a dig of a spade had uncovered a marvellous

* The inscriptions to Pierre Janet are not included in the "copy-book of my dedications" kept in the B.N. (Manuscripts Dept.).

† Janet started publishing his works on neuroses in 1898.

‡ The following pages include other quotations from Dr Janet, not reproduced in Roussel's posthumous book.

mine, I had won the most astonishing jackpot. I lived more at that moment than during the rest of my existence." At the same time, Martial ceased being interested in anything else and had great difficulty in interrupting his work occasionally in order to eat something. He was not completely motionless, he paced around, and wrote little, remaining for hours on end holding his pen, motionless, absorbed in a daydream and in the sensation of his glory...

Martial speaks of glory as mystics do of God: the certitude that he is possessed of glory cannot be shaken in any way, even though there is no reason to justify it. "It is a true inspiration, it is truer than a perception, it is a sort of luminous perception, for that glory beams out, becoming visible in rays of light which emerge from his pen, from his paper and from his entire body." This improbable glory is also rather illogical; it is everywhere, within him and outside him, it is an idea and it is a being, as he is also Napoleon and Victor Hugo, while still remaining himself.

"Martial speaks of glory as mystics do of God," Janet wrote. This is presumably what justifies the inclusion of Martial's observations in a book principally concerned with Madeleine, who wrote:

If in my life I have had moments of atrocious suffering, I have also experienced incredible joys which made me forget all about them. These moments of extreme pleasure began in my youth, the first and the weakest occurring when I was eleven, I think. They were already strong at seventeen or nineteen, but they didn't last long and were rare. Nevertheless, they have grown more and more intense and have now become strange and incomprehensible to others, filling whole days and weeks... I feel embarrassed about discussing these joys, as you have asked me to, because I feel that you're going to accuse me of exaggerating ridiculously, when I come to talk about an atmosphere of indescribable delight, pleasure so intense that I can't bear it. [...]

That's why I don't want to get better, I'm determined to keep to the same path I've followed until now and which has shown me the way to happiness... All of me is bathed in pure delight, which gives me an idea of heavenly bliss. My heart is awash with love, my enlightened soul contemplates horizons which cast it into rapture and my senses experience impressions that are so delightful that I cannot analyse them.

An initial paragraph, which Roussel rejected, originally preceded the text as published in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Janet insists:

The study of ecstasy which I have just referred to specifies the importance of this final characteristic: the sensation of the divine. While looking for similar cases of ecstasy, but without religious conceptions, I soon noticed that they are extremely rare, and then that they were imperfect and quite dissimilar to that beautiful ecstasy which always has a religious aspect.

This is then followed by the passage Roussel reproduced in *Comment j'ai écrit...*, but he once more omitted the end of the paragraph where Janet explains why, in his opinion, Roussel's ecstasies were "imperfect":

Flournoy's observation presents us with an individual who was until then irreligious and who, after an excessively long period of fatigue, had a true attack of ecstasy in which he rose up above

himself and: “encountered God: it is not possible that Moses on Mount Sinai was in closer communication with God.” After that attack, he remained convinced that he had encountered God and became a convert. Ideas and religious feelings are part of the definition of total ecstasy.

Dr Janet explicitly acknowledged that he had no idea of what “poetic ecstasy” might be. But when it came to religious ecstasy, he was quite an expert, a specialist even! Can this be held against him? How could he have known what Roussel himself did not? This is why, in Dr Janet’s opinion, Raymond Roussel remained a “poor little patient”, a not particularly interesting case, definitely not a “major” patient, and why he would never reach “total ecstasy” because of his lack of religious feelings. It is strange that, in his observations of this “manic-depressive psychosis”, Pierre Janet made no reference at all to his patient’s physical bearing, his elegance or his deportment, which is extremely rare in “case” studies. Dr Janet’s clinical notes are no longer extant, but it may be supposed that Roussel’s records were not empty and did indeed contain some personal details, family background, medical certificates, and so on. But, reading between the lines of Pierre Janet’s book, we have a feeling that he was irritated by this rich patient who was so preoccupied by his excessively exaggerated feelings of “glory”, and that the doctor had other forms of ecstasy to fry. Yet we must not, in turn, be unfair to Dr Janet. We should even be grateful to him for having succeeded in doing something that no other person who came close to Raymond Roussel ever managed: to make him talk about himself.



“Raymond Roussel aged nineteen, while writing *La Doublure*.”

But experiencing feelings of glory is insufficient, being merely the marks left by a revelation. What Roussel now had to do was to find out if this sensation was common to all men of genius, and hence be sure of his own. That is why he made enquiries with Camille Saint-Saëns and Gaston Mauberger, Pierre Loti’s secretary, in order to find out if these two great men had experienced a similar illumination. He was disappointed to learn that neither of these two geniuses had had the same sensations. Nonetheless, he was never to forget that sign, even though his own mother did not notice the rays of light that he felt emanating from him, or at least she makes no mention of any in her diaries.

In October 1896, he had his photograph taken in Milan. This was the portrait he had published on the frontispiece of his posthumous work, *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, published in 1935, with the caption: “Raymond Roussel aged nineteen, while writing *La Doublure*”, and it was the same photograph that he gave to the marble shop for the sculptor to use when preparing his tombstone. For Raymond Roussel, time stopped in 1896. It was in this image that we are supposed to read in his eyes the extraordinary sensation that he experienced and that he never forgot. He wanted this photograph to bear witness to that fact.

In his literary ecstasy, the subject wants only to deal with pure art, freed of all reality: “If there were anything real about that description,” says Martial, “it would be ugly.” The conception of

glory which exists in Martial's mind is decidedly difficult for us to understand, because we always associate glory with the appreciation expressed by mankind, *volitare per ora virum* [to fly from men's mouths]. Since he was possessed of glory at the age of nineteen, and still is despite his apparent lack of success, he seems to be making that glory into a philosophical absolute, independent of actual events in the world.

Martial's glory, which we have discussed when referring to ecstasies, is an incredible delight: "He lived more at that moment than during the rest of his existence, he would give the rest of his life for another moment of such happiness. I was waking up to life and to poetry..."

Yet *La Doublure* seems to us, perhaps, not to be Roussel's most original work. In any case, it certainly would not have been sufficient to bring him that "posthumous blossoming" he so dreamed of and which, thanks to a few Rousselians, he had already acquired before he died. If *La Doublure* remained his favourite work during Roussel's lifetime, then it was less for the work itself than for the memory of a mental state he would never again experience. As Dr Janet put it, thirty years later:

I have cited the observation of Martial who, when nineteen, "sensed glory" during a period of hypo-maniacal excitement brought on by overwork. At the age of fifty, he has, from that crisis of light and glory, retained the conviction that he possesses glory which in reality exists for him already. [...] Martial, whose modesty is genuine, is not predisposed to looking down on others, and he certainly does not remain in a hypo-maniacal state. [...] In my opinion, the persistence of this conviction should rather be explained by the persistence of his memories, which is also strange after periods of elation.

LA DOUBLURE AND THE NICE CARNIVAL

It would perhaps be interesting now to know exactly what literary form plunged Roussel into such a state of exaltation. It was classical verse, for *La Doublure* is a poem, and, moreover, Roussel had a high opinion of its prosodic virtues. In *Imprcssions of Africa* we shall see him speaking rather condescendingly of the Stock Market orders written "in twelve-syllable doggerel full of padding and hiatuses". The gamblers are not, like him, poets, but stockbrokers, and through them he is obviously aiming at his father. But, at an age when nobody can avoid being influenced, who did Roussel imitate? He was never involved in any school or movement. At the moment when, after the battles waged in the name of Symbolism, the young left-bank writers congregated around the first great reviews such as the *Mercur de France*, Roussel remained resolutely "right bank". He admired the Academicians, Paul Bourget, Pierre Loti, the Lemerre press, and the newspaper *Le Gaulois*. His favourite poet was François Coppée, less for his *Intimités* than for his *La Grève des forgerons*. Roussel's reading was that of a typical bourgeois of the time. So was it naïveté that made him write a verse novel? At the time *La Doublure* was published, Henry Béranger devoted

the three opening pages of the *Revue encyclopédique Larousse* of 15 March 1897 to “The Poem-Novel: a new form of literary art”. Gabriel Sarrazin, Édouard Schuré and Gabriele D’Annunzio, whom he cites, were versifiers but also, in their various ways, responded to the need to renew the French novel.

The alexandrines in *La Doublure* astonish us for their complete lack of images or “poetic” commonplaces. It is rhymed descriptive prose, but not rhythmic — which is particularly surprising coming from a musician — and with no attempt made to uplift the sonority of the rhymes, which are extraordinarily flat. This resemblance to versified prose is further underlined by the irregularity of the scansion, to such an extent that what classical prosody deems to be an exception here becomes the rule, while the description is so meticulous that we can no longer pick out the padding — even though there is plenty to be found!

The way he produced prose in verse does at least assure us of one thing: Roussel did not read his poems out aloud, but instead wrote them using lists of rhymes. The absence of rhythm indicates how difficult it was for Roussel to write in verse, despite his claims, and this is why he chose the alexandrine, French poetry’s longest line. Only the octosyllabics of *Mon Âme* were composed out loud and came “easily”.

Michel Leiris states the case: “It reads as though something that could have been expressed in prose has been versified.” And, at the same time, we wonder if this really is poetry. Isn’t this way of writing more like encoding? “It reads as though” it is in verse, and you assume its uneven lines are verses, but mightn’t all that be an illusion caused by typographical presentation? Or by the capital letters at the beginnings of the lines, or a scattering of dull rhymes here and there, intended to make this prose look like poetry? It should have been quite striking thanks to the absence of pauses or caesuras in these lines. So is it a game? Here is an example chosen at random:

There, the whole family had set up shop, putting end to end several tables to sell confetti, crying that theirs was the best; a woman’s voice dominates; in front, crouched on the ground, a little girl digs around with a spade in a large, half-empty canvas bag, the edges of which are rolled down all around; with her spade she then fills up a paper bag, which she is holding by its base in her other hand, and the edges of which are completely straight, not wrinkled; her body looks thin and puny...

Now, the original manuscripts prove that this really was a piece of “versification”. Roussel began by placing the rhymes and then filled up the rest of the lines. They are “bouts-rimés”.^{*} However, in contrast to what Roussel would later obtain thanks to his “procedure”, this versification was used to describe real places and events, or at least things he knew well and did not want to deform: Boulevard theatres, itinerant players, the “*Fête à Neu-Neu*”, the Nice Carnival and its topography.

The Rousselian “procedure” was not far off, even if Roussel had not yet mastered

^{*} A technique employed by some of the Pléiade poets (and others later), which consists in composing poems around pre-arranged rhymes at the line-ends. [Trans.]

it. It is in *La Doublure* that we first find the inscriptions and placards that later appear in *L'Inconsolable* and *Têtes de carton du Carnaval de Nice*: the two coat-tails ["*pans*"] of the school-master's jacket, each with the inscription "*Pan!*" ["Bang!"]; the wheelbarrow loaded with "*terre promise... au voisin*" ["earth (land) promised... to the neighbour"], but also "the promised land ..."; the bald man brandishing a banner marked "*Je suis chauve, hein?*" ["I'm bald, aren't I?" punning on "I'm a chauvinist"]; the gendarme saying "*Je soutiens un souteneur*" ["I'm supporting a pimp"]. This is in order to "make a pun", says *La Doublure*; "it is a rebus", echoes *L'Inconsolable*.

Raymond Roussel gathered together suitable material and until his death he kept the poster for the Carnival of 1896, along with a single issue of *Le Courrier des étrangers*, that of 20 February 1896, which included an "illustrated report of the Nice Carnival"* in which the route of the parade was underlined in blue pencil. But none of the floats described by Roussel correspond to the real floats of the Carnival of 1896.

In this way, Roussel did not describe things he had seen, but instead pieced his scenes together from a series of creative puns he had made up; consequently, nothing was taken from Alexis and Gustave-Adolphe Mossa, the organisers of the parade and the Carnival's "image-makers" since 1875, each year renewing the masks and floats on watercolours, posters and programmes. Roussel could therefore justly claim that, for him, "imagination is everything" and that he owed nothing to anybody.

Roussel knew the Carnival well: he had been going there with his mother every year since 1890, when he was thirteen, and was often to return to Monte Carlo and Nice. At the time, the Carnival season attracted 25,000 tourists (of whom 15,000 were French) each year.

When the Carnival makes its official, solemn entrance, the town, which seemed asleep, changes its appearance in a matter of hours. The balconies become decorated as if by magic; the cars disappear under multi-coloured hangings. [...] The ear is assailed by sellers of programmes and confetti — the so-called "*bonbons*".

At ten o'clock on the first morning, a cannon is fired from the castle. The parade starts to assemble. In a twinkling of the eye, shopkeepers produce from their stock-rooms dominoes, Pierrots, masks, wigs, false noses, the whole carry-on in fact! [...] At nine in the evening, the Carnival makes its brilliant entrance by going down Avenue de la Gare, accompanied by all sorts of music, torch-bearers, countless masks, and a huge crowd. The next day, the first parade takes place from Avenue de la Gare to Place Masséna and Rue Saint-François-de-Paule. Masks spring up from the ground, squadrons of horses and donkeys line up, brightly coloured groups replace the isolated masks: it is a frenzied bacchanalia, with songs and mad dancing surrounding the bandstands. Floats move past, majestically cheered by the crowds.

The scene is pure magic, and everybody, rich or poor, young or old, has put on the traditional dominoes, stripping the shops of their supplies. That variegated crowd, all dressed in brightly coloured dominoes, moves around the floats, dancing crazy farandoles. The noise makes your head spin. Everybody becomes caught up in this frenzy, and you return to your hotel soaked, exhausted, covered in confetti, but still spinning around in strange dance steps on the pavement.†

* *La Doublure* carries its date of composition after its final line: "1896". It also contains an allusion to Marie-Joseph Chénier's play *Charles IX*, revived at the Comédie-Française on 25 November 1895. It is a strange coincidence that in the same year *La Doublure* appeared, Paul and Victor Margueritte published a novel called *Le Carnaval de Nice*. 1897 was also the year when Pierre Loti's *Ramuntcho* came out.

†Not here the familiar game, but a type of loose cloak worn at masquerades, with a half-mask to conceal the wearer's identity. [Trans.]

‡ Edmond Benjamin and Paul Desachy, *Le Boulevard*, 1893.

Raymond Roussel retraced the route of the Carnival parade with obsessive precision:

In Nice, in the afternoon, in Avenue
de la Gare,* a huge crowd
Celebrates the last day [...] of the Carnival...
There, Gaspard and Roberte, watch carefully
So as not to lose each other, slowly,
On the left-hand pavement while nearing Place
Masséna, walk among that populace...
There, under the arcades, some drag their heels...
A man, there, stops walking and accosts them
Going back with them to Place Masséna
Whence he in fact had come...
At the start of
The avenue, seething crowds ceaselessly
Increase...
Then, Place Masséna
Stretches in a teeming mass before them...
Now, on their right,
Arcades further off once again stand
With their fat square pillars...
[...]
Roberte, noticing on her right Rue
De la Terrasse, says they should go that way
To return to the hotel...
That evening, after dinner, side by side,
Listening on the beach below to the tide
They're almost alone, strolling quietly on
The Promenade des Anglais...

All of this meticulous topography, often supported by the words “here”, “there”, “on the right” and “on the left”, is accurate. The description of the festivities takes up 211 of the novel’s 318 pages, and Roussel would return to this theme in 1904 in *L’Inconsolable* and *Têtes de carton du Carnaval de Nice*, not to mention unpublished passages (four belonging to *Têtes de carton*), unfinished manuscripts and various allusions in *La Scinc*. For ten years, between 1896 and 1906, he was absorbed by the Carnival. During this time, was he struck by the carnival-like nature of his own existence, his interest in that “looking-glass world” of Rue Alibert in Paris, where his hero Gaspard lived, and its reflection, Rue Alberti in Nice?

The other main scenery in this novel comes from fun-fairs and the theatre. As regards the latter, it is known that Roussel was a regular theatre-goer and that his family was not averse to amateur histrionics. As for fun-fairs, this in effect means the *Fête à Ncu-Ncu*,† which Roussel did not even feel the need to situate, since it took place each year on Avenue de Neuilly, ten minutes’ walk from his parents’ villa. He had no need of

* Today the Avenue Jean-Médecin.

† Two theatre troupes came back every year to the Fête de Neuilly, the “Cocherie or Marketti theatre troupes, far too beautiful for my taste, and they looked too much like real theatre troupes.” Jules Lemaître, *Impressions de théâtre*, 2nd series, 1888.

landmarks or street names to engage his memory or his gift for observation.

In its descriptive passages, *The Doubling* also gives a clear picture of the battles of plaster confetti which occurred during the Carnival, and the participants' protective metal masks, wooden shovels and shoulder-bags:

Gaspard holds a large rounded tin shovel
In his hand, covered with white dust. His sack
Hanging down from a strap across his back,
Full of confetti, rubs his hip. Her spade
For throwing confetti is lighter, made
With a flexible handle all in wood
[...] his head is completely covered,
By a red woollen liberty cap, his
Ears too, so that nothing bar his face is
Visible [...]

He, like her, has
A mask of metallic mesh, through which, as
Opposed to all the others, having no
Paint to make it opaque, as they follow,
Their faces can be seen and recognised;
Their masks even lack moulded, stylised
Faces, and are plain curves. She, to prevail
Against plaster, has placed a thin, blue veil
On her eyes, folded, as a precaution
Beneath, thus further misting her vision,
From her brow to the middle of her nose.

Nothing could be more exact than this description, and the same goes for subsequent ones dealing with the gestures of confetti-throwers or observations about dust. This prosaic poetry will be of great interest to ethnologists, for these traditions were already dying at the very time Roussel was writing. Paper confetti appeared in Paris for the first time in 1892; then, following a number of accidents, local decrees tried to make its use obligatory in the Nice Carnival.

However, *La Doublure* is last and not least a novel! As some people might have mistaken it for simply a long poem, Roussel took the precaution of pointing out, on the reverse of the title-page:

NOTE

Since this book is a novel, it should be started on the first page and finished on the last.

THE AUTHOR

And that is perhaps all that Gustave Kahn had noticed about it when he wrote in *La Revue Blanche*:

The verse novel had tempted almost nobody since Paul Bourget's *Edel*, not even Bourget himself; in any case, *Edel*, like François Coppée's *L'Olivier*, is more of a short story in verse

than a novel. M. Raymond Roussel, the author of *La Doublure*, insists that his book be called a novel.

La Doublure is the story of a failure, a novel which begins and ends badly. Gaspard Lenoir, who is “understudying” [in French “*doubler*”] a famous actor — first failure — makes a mess of a gesture and is hissed — second failure. Roberte de Blou, a *demi-mondaine* who has a “small-time actress” friend called Fanny Nérét, falls in love with him when seeing him acting in an ambiguous role. During the absence of Paul, presumably her regular lover, she goes to see Gaspard and convinces him to leave his theatre and come to Nice with her. After the Carnival, they grow tired of each other. She runs away — Gaspard’s third failure. Still in love, he looks for work, but he is unknown and finally resigns himself to working in a fun-fair theatre (fourth failure). The only success was the Carnival:

Gaspard looked up at the stars in the sky.

The plot is confusing, if only because of the overlaps in the failures of successive *doublures*: Gaspard is not just the *doublure*, or understudy, of a famous actor, he also doubles for Paul, his mistress’s usual lover. As for Roberte (de Blou is a spoonerism of *double*), she is kept by Paul, and so is a sort of understudy, as are all mistresses of men who are the right age to be married. What is sure is that the Gaspard character will never experience that “glory” which so filled Raymond Roussel while writing this catalogue of failure.

That is the way it goes, he told Dr Janet. Some people are predestined! As the poet said: and now you feel a burning on your forehead... The star that you wear on your gleaming brows. Yes, I once felt that I had that star on my forehead, and I shall never forget it.

The Star on the Forehead is also the name of the play whose performance Roussel was to stage in 1924. It is already there, among the “stars in the sky” Gaspard looks up at, though he will never have the “star on his forehead” and will remain an understudy. He will never have:

genius’s sacred fire
((((Which makes the one it lights become so vain
That the true stars in the sky now seem plain
Beside the new star that shines on his brow...*)

There are many allusions to that “star on the forehead” in Roussel’s work. As early as *My Soul*, the young poet affirmed (even though, according to him, this poem was written before the attack of glory!):

* *New Impressions of Africa*.

They stare at me, especially my forehead.

In *The Concert* (in *The View*), a happy woman:

Carefree, she trusts in
Her lucky star...

In chapter eleven of *Impressions of Africa*, little Sirdah has “on her forehead a strangely-shaped red birthmark, stellated with long, yellow points”; in chapter thirteen, “on the fronton the words ‘The Club of Incomparables’ were formed by a mass of starry beams.” Consequently, Raymond Roussel was not surprised, when visiting Camille Flammarion in Juvisy, to notice a star on the fronton of the astronomer’s observatory.

In *The Star on the Forehead*, the last anecdote (Act III, scene IV) takes us from the cloth [*toilc*] of Elbeuf to the front [*front*, punning on “forehead”] where the Prussians are besieging Paris, via a star (“a ring with a rose-shaped diamond”) at the bottom of a cesspool, and leads up to the final scene of “The Predestined”: “a central poetic image, *the star on the forehead*, which some people have at birth, but which can’t be acquired. It’s a distinguishing mark of great creators in all the various branches of beauty.”* This is an echo of the first anecdote, in Act I of the play, where the audience can see two Indian twins with a *tika* marked on their foreheads, symbolising a divine presence.

ALPHONSE LEMERRE AND THE FAILURE OF LA DOUBLURE

So, Raymond Roussel had already finished writing *La Doublure* when, as a fourth-year piano student at the *Conservatoire*, he played Rubinstein’s *Study in C Minor* for his examination on 22 January 1897. Louis Diémer noted: “Extremely solid technical skill.” The twenty-year-old poet was turning into a virtuoso.

When his father died, Raymond Roussel had not yet published anything. He had written some poetry, but had his father read it? This seems improbable. But what is certain is that his mother, Marguerite Roussel, would turn her son into a writer by paying the publication costs of his first few books.

She was a friend of Paul Bourget’s, and it is reasonable to suppose that he advised her to have *La Doublure* published by Alphonse Lemerre, whose reputation for publishing poets made him eminently suitable for the young Roussel’s ambitions. Most apprentice poets of his generation would no doubt have preferred Léon Vanier or the *Mercure de France* on the left bank, but Roussel remained a traditionalist. The preceding generation’s poets had all dreamt of being published by Lemerre

* Translation by Martin Sorrell.

(Isidore Ducasse had even thought of entrusting him with his *Poésies*), since he was known to publish a great deal and to be surrounded by excellent advisers, notably Anatole France.

Lemerre, who was to become the Parnassians' publisher-in-chief, opened his bookshop in 1866 in Passage Choiseul, near the *Grands Boulevards* where all the main publishers were to be found. Before long, he had issued Paul Verlaine's *Poèmes saturniens*, the *Parnasse contemporain*, and the works of poets such as Leconte de Lisle, José-Maria de Heredia, Alphonse Daudet, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and above all Paul Bourget, whose *Sensations d'Italie* sold 9000 copies in 1891. Lemerre also published old and modern works in small luxury editions, which were to make his fortune. At the end of his life, this son of a farmer, who made a point of underlining the fact in his trademark "The Digging Man" and his motto "*Fac et spera*","* owned a villa in Ville-d'Avray, where he liked to entertain, and a town house (10, Rue Chardin) on the lawns of the Trocadéro, the staircase of which was decorated by two fashionable painters, Henri Pille and Paul Chabas, with portraits of the poets he published. The house also contained a few paintings by Corot.

For his new publications, Alphonse Lemerre always used an octavo format with a yellow dustjacket. In 1880, he bought up Louis Perrin's "augustal characters" from Théophile Baudoire, designed in Lyons in 1846, with their Renaissance-style ornamental capitals, devices and tail-pieces that were so typical of the period's taste. He renamed them *clzévirs* and used them for printing all his book covers. The question as to what sort of typeface would suit Raymond Roussel's verse and prose has rarely been asked, but it is certain that Lemerre's layout, which must have been presented as the *nec plus ultra* of the typographic tradition, was not a happy choice. It was also Alphonse Lemerre who, in 1875, decided to adopt Japanese vellum for all of his limited editions. Raymond Roussel had little choice when it came to how his book was to be presented.

Lemerre, who was born in 1838, was fifty-nine when *La Doublure* came out; he had already handed over the running of his bookshop to his son, Désiré, who was to replace him completely when he died in 1912.† But it seems that Roussel dealt mostly with a certain G. Albert and later with Eugène Vallée, who was in charge of the composing-room at the printers.

In an article‡ published in 1887, Jean Lorrain, who accused Alphonse Lemerre of being "the Arthur Meyer of literature" and of "publishing only for cash", claimed Lemerre tripled the production costs of books published at the author's expense.

In Roussel's case, we now know that the publication of *Chiquenaude*, a thin booklet, cost 104.10 francs; the 550 copies of *La Vuc* 1015 francs; and the 1100 copies of *Impressions d'Afrique* were billed at 2409 francs.

"He thought it normal that a poet pay his publisher."§ However, in *New Impressions of Africa*, when, it is true, his fortune had melted away, there can be

* "Do and hope".

† Désiré Lemerre's sons, Alphonse and Pierre, would later replace him. In *À la Gloire du livre: trois époques*, a brochure published in 1929, they said of themselves: "They are also resolved upon developing all forms of publicity, but without having recourse to certain abuses, which the public is in any case now weary of. The house's authors will benefit from the efforts that have been planned. Among these authors, some, like Abel Hermant, Maxime Formont, Albert-Émile Sorel, Jacques Lombard, etc., are pursuing their brilliant careers; others have recently joined the team in Passage Choiseul: Louis Vaunois, Eugène Quinche, Mme de Felt, Jean Berty." Roussel obviously does not deserve a mention alongside such prestigious writers. The Lemerre house was set up in 1866, and wound up in 1965 by its owners just before its centenary. It is not known what became of its archives and it is to be feared that they have been destroyed.

‡ Republished in *La Ville empoisonnée*, Pall Mall Paris, Crès, 1936.

§ Jean Cocteau, *En toute hâte*, 1933. No letters or documents concerning Raymond Roussel have yet been found in Jean Cocteau's papers in Milly-la-Fôret.

heard the weariness of the mature writer who, with the young author, wonders:

How long he must pay to publish his books.

Yet Roussel was totally unconcerned by his royalties. For his novels, he never became a member of La Société des gens de lettres, nor of La Société des auteurs dramatiques for his plays.

The printing of *La Doublure* was completed on 11 May 1897, at L’Imprimerie Lemerre, 6, Rue des Bergers, in the fifteenth *arrondissement*, just by the present-day Imprimerie Nationale (built between 1907 and 1925). The publication date was set for 10 June. On the 15th, Roussel took another examination at the *Conservatoire*, and played the final movement of Beethoven’s *Sonata Op. 57* with, in Louis Diémer’s words, “striking equality between the fingers”. Lemerre deposited the copyright of *La Doublure* on 8 July, indicating the name of the collection, *Bibliothèque contemporain*, and the price, 3.50 francs. However, he made no mention of it in the updates of the *Bibliographie de la France*, and nor would Roussel’s other works be mentioned until 28 October 1932. This failure would even extend to the legal deposit of *Locus Solus*, *Pages Choisies*, *L’Étoile au Front* and *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*. This is unforgivable negligence on the part of what was supposed to be a serious publishing house.

Roussel “never did anything to influence critics’ judgement in his favour”, Michel Leiris has remarked. He even refused to meet the critic Henry Bidou, despite inscribing his copy of *L’Étoile au Front* with: “A Renaissance man who inspires in me fervent admiration, mingled with profound gratitude”, then later, on *La Poussière de Soleils*: “whose stupefying universality is one of the mysteries of our age.”

In *The Nuptials*, he recalled that glory:

... it isn’t bad to stay misunderstood
For some time: we then see a greater good
In heady glory, that some call so vain.

And the character of Claude anticipates Roussel’s confidences to Dr Janet:

The apprentice [...] is still the only one to have felt
New language whose sap now rises inside;
Inordinate pride falls on him, his hide
Sends out beams across the world, from the drawer
Where his manuscript sleeps...

Michel Leiris remarked in his notebook*:

* Roussel & Co.

Roussel and the genius that befell him as though he'd won the jackpot. He is wild with delight, but totally lacking in pride. He has been *lucky*, and it is no more down to him than the fact that he is rich, for example.

Roussel does not establish any hierarchy between these slices of *luck*: to be a writer of genius, a brilliant inventor of chess moves, or related to all of the Empire's great families, is all one to him. Just a hint of bitterness when talking of his success as a pianist and mimic.

Did Roussel then write dedications in all his critics' review copies? He did not yet keep a notebook in which he copied down his dedications, and we know only those that he sent to certain close friends: on the copy sent to his brother-in-law, Charles de Breteuil:

to Charles, Raymond

on the one for Marcel Proust, who replied; and, later, on the copy for his business manager:

to Monsieur Eugène Leiris,
deeply affectionate recollections.

Thirty-five years later, Michel Leiris noted that Charlotte Dufrène had told him: "The failure of *La Doublure* marked the end of Roussel's serenity."* Serenity is certainly not the right word. As for Pierre Janet, he noted that Roussel's enthusiasm and sense of glory "greatly diminished while the book was being printed". And Roussel himself said: "When *La Doublure* appeared on 10 June 1897, its lack of success provoked a terribly violent shock in me. I had the sensation of being hurled to the ground from the top of a prodigious summit of glory."†

Pierre Janet observed:

When the volume appeared, when the young man, in the throes of emotion, went out into the street and realised that people were not turning round as he went by, the sensation of glory and light was suddenly switched off. There then began a real attack of melancholic depression combined with a strange form of persecution mania, taking the form of an obsession and a crazed idea that mankind was involved in mutual and universal denigration.

To sum up: Roussel wrote, "When *La Doublure* appeared on [Thursday] 10 June 1897" — but at this time, the book had already been in print for a month, since Tuesday 11 May; Lemerre registered its copyright on Thursday 8 July. The fact that Raymond Roussel specifies the date of "publication" as 10 June is problematic, especially since he took an examination at the *Conservatoire* on 15 June! Was the "attack" already over, or did Roussel mix up the dates? And why did he not remember that all the roots of this attack were already present by the time he was seventeen,‡ when he wrote in *My Soul*:

* *Journal*, 1961.

† But was the failure as total as Roussel would have us believe? In the *Journal* of 29 August, Jean Lorrain noted in his "*Pall-Mall Semaine*": "[In Aix-les-Bains] there is also... Roussel, the son of the old stockbroker, who has turned himself into a poet and whose volume of verse is being snapped up by the local beauties..."

‡ 1894, when he turned seventeen, was an important year for Roussel: on 29 March, his nephew Robert was born; on 14 June, Diémer noted his "interesting and distinguished musical nature"; and on 6 July, his father died as the result of a stroke. However, the only thing Roussel mentions for this year is *Mon Âme*.

At that nearby explosion
Of my genius, universal,
I see all the world bow down
Before that name: Raymond Roussel.

Charlotte Dufrène confirmed to Michel Leiris that “none of his Drs [Janet included, whom Roussel went on seeing and who would cheer him up for a few days] ever understood anything about his condition”.*

During the long years of Dr Janet’s consultations, Raymond Roussel confessed his despair at not receiving that glory which was his due: “It is horrible that there is no respect for the glory one has acquired: a single detractor has more of an effect on me than three million admirers; I need unanimity in order to feel calm.” Or: “... the feeling of pain that I always felt when seeing my works come up against an almost universal wall of hostile incomprehension.”

The nervous illness he contracted following the shock he had experienced took him to Kreuzlingen in Switzerland on two more occasions, and to the clinic of Saint-Cloud for eight months to treat his neurasthenia. It was that terrible shock, that fall which would make him lead an increasingly isolated existence, away from society. His shyness became morbid, and he knew it. He suffered from agoraphobia and his final flight led him to take refuge in Sicily, where nobody knew him. What he would now seek, instead of that glory which had slipped through his fingers, was the parody of it: notoriety. His fortune made this possible; the young poet’s pride was gradually to sink into vanity.

Up until this point, Raymond Roussel had not avoided fashionable life. It was during these excursions into the outside world that he would meet Marcel Proust. The Roussels and the Prousts had friends in common, such as Reynaldo Hahn, Madeleine Lemaire, and so on, while Georges Roussel, Raymond’s elder brother, was the same age as Marcel. But the similarity that some have claimed to see between these two writers — as though Proust’s glory were needed to resurrect Roussel’s — is superficial. In his notebook, Michel Leiris observed that they met, but did not become friends:

Relationship between Proust and Roussel: people of the same time, both rich, bourgeois and homosexual. Each had the same liking for “impersonations”. Same way of seeing things through a microscope. Same obsession with childhood memories. Both haunted by the passing of time and death. Refuge not in God, but in a personal universe, which has been pieced together. Here and there, same spurts of vaudeville and trivial, even scatological humour. Similar way of shutting themselves up, one in his cork-lined bedroom, the other in the cabin of his ship. Same lack of conformism under an orthodox exterior. Analogous way of being subjugated by the historical halo surrounding certain noble names (the feudal system for Proust, the First Empire for Roussel).†

* *Journal*, August 1961.

† *Roussel & Co.*

Or else, according to Jean Cocteau: "It is a social and physical similarity of figure, of nervous habits picked up in the same social stratum during their youth".* Raymond Roussel was not to be found in the society frequented by Marcel Proust or Robert de Montesquiou and, at the age of twenty, he stopped going to the salons where he had cut a dash as an adolescent:

... Like the fabled Hero-Child, you unwearyingly carry the weight of a formidable poetic apparatus. You have breath, which is rare these days, and without losing it you write a hundred lines of verse while others write ten.†

How did the "Child" take his elder's irony, mocking the verbal diarrhoea of *La Doublure*, which he had just received? With pure naïveté, for thirty years later, after Proust's death, Roussel reproduced this fragment of the letter which he had held on to carefully.

Barely one month after the onset of the attack of depression on 10 June, a long poem, *Mon Âme*, appeared on pages three and six of *Le Gaulois* of the 12 July 1897, preceded by the following notice:

We asked M. Raymond Roussel, the celebrated author of *La Doublure*, to contribute a poem, and he has given us one of his first; it was composed three years ago; he was then barely seventeen and the reader will judge for himself the promise of such a precocious and prolific genius.

The last three quatrains of this poem (republished at the end of the volume containing *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in 1932) display a rare pride, if not megalomania:

Watching them fleeing in its midst,
Verses surge up effortlessly,
In a faithful post-existence
I see my growing destiny.

At that nearby explosion
Of my genius, universal,
I see all the world bow down
Before that name: Raymond Roussel.

On the earth that I now bestride,
I see that ever-burning verse,
Which, alone and brotherless, lights
All the existing universe.

* *Opium*, 1930.

† Extract from a letter from Marcel Proust written in 1897, collected in an inset of quotations included in Roussel's books in 1927. The original, which we hoped to find among the "letters received" in the Roussel archive in the Manuscript Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, has vanished. Nor do we know what became of the signed copy of *La Doublure* Roussel sent Proust, or his subsequent books, assuming that he continued sending them.

After this, another note informs us that these verses may be "some of his first" but they are certainly not the only ones the author has written since the age of

seventeen. *Le Gaulois* provides us with a bibliography of the young Raymond Roussel's poetic works as of 12 July 1897:

Mon Âme was part of his first collection, entitled *Des Choses*; then, two "extremely long" poems, *Le Palais* and *L'Île déserte*; after that, another collection of diverse pieces, entitled *Sanguines*; finally, he built up to his novel, *La Doublure*, with *Un Somme* and *Jours gras*; and, just before *La Doublure* [i.e. in 1896, when it was finished, or 1897, when it was published], *Souffre-douleur*.

One thing alone is certain, which is that Raymond Roussel wrote this notice himself; he wanted to convince us that he was prolific. All of these texts, which are still unknown today (with the exception, perhaps, of part of *Le Palais*), had thus been written during the previous two years, between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. None of the texts kept today in the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale occur in this bibliography from 1897: this seems to confirm that the manuscripts we are familiar with were indeed written between 1896 and 1903, between *La Doublure* and *La Vue*.

This, then, must have been the period of what Roussel called "prospecting", during which he composed, among others, those great literary machines *La Seine* and *Les Noces*. Did he consider these pieces not to be worth publishing because they did not reproduce the feeling of glory which *La Doublure* had procured for him? Or was he talked out of publication? We do not know.

And yet that would be just too simple. Raymond Roussel seems now to have convinced us that he wrote in verse only because he had not yet found the "procedures" that would allow him to write his prose novels and plays. However, *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* of 2-3 October 1897 (i.e. not yet five months after the publication of *La Doublure*) published two prose "*Chroniquettes*" which are interesting for two reasons: they are Roussel's first known and dated prose writings; and in them, we can see the embryonic form of what was later to become the "procedure(s)".

In the first of these "*Chroniquettes*", Roussel tells us that he is "a terrible one for confusions" and, in a short tale, he plays on similar sounding words, pretending to confuse pearls [*perles*] with blackbirds [*merles*]; then, in the second, even shorter piece, hollyhocks [*roses trémières*] in a garden with a dairymaid [*crémière*] called Rose. The narrative "procedure" is still a long way off, but these "*Chroniquettes*" remind us of charades and, naturally, of parties and carnival masks.

GEORGES ROUSSEL — THE ELDER BROTHER

"Alone and brotherless", wrote Raymond Roussel in the penultimate line of *Mon Âme*; what he meant was "without equal". This particular way of marking his superiority is striking, because Roussel had a brother, and we cannot help wondering how the elder brother reacted to the younger one's trumpeting, when he read the poem in *Le Gaulois*. Public records state that both of them lived in Rue de Chaillot in Neuilly. They saw each other every day. Georges was a sculptor, and made a bust of his sister Germaine, which she was to keep.* He is supposed also to have been a painter, and his notebooks, which are mostly filled with the addresses of suppliers of artists' and sculptors' materials, confirm this idea. But Georges was a poet as well: he wrote some rather bad sentimental verses, using women's names as acrostics. He amused himself by adding a few quatrains to Alfred de Musset's *Ballade à la lune*, as well as this "Dedication":

Princess, a thought
At this moment leaps up,
Pushed
From the depths of my soul.

A rare beauty, you
Have, as they say
The moon,
And I have the "I".

He was a horseman, and while a student in 1888, enlisted for a conditional commission with the 25th Regiment of Dragoons in Angers. He was a man about town, and a member of various fashionable clubs: the Cercle de l'Union artistique, the Cercle de l'Omnium and the Société des Acacias (skating, pigeon-shooting), with its neighbouring property in Neuilly. But one must not confuse him, as I myself have done, with other Georges Roussels. During the same period, there was another painter called Georges Roussel. Likewise Lugné-Poe, after Raymond Roussel's death, wrote in *L'Avenir* of 19 August 1933: "I knew Raymond Roussel, and what is more, his elder brother was one of my childhood friends"; he was confusing him with Georges Roussel, sub-editor of *La Plume* from 1891 to 1896, and founder in 1898 of the puppet theatre on Rue Ballu.

MON ÂME, ARTHUR MEYER AND LE GAULOIS

* No further details are available here, since the bust has not been located.

The general tone of *Mon Âme*'s one-hundred-and-thirty-six octosyllabic quatrains

would not have surprised the readers of the day. They would immediately have thought of Albert Samain, whom François Coppée had discovered four years before:

My soul is a child in fancy dress

and of so many other poems, generally sonnets, which began in the same way. Thirty-five years later, in 1932, when Roussel published this poem in the volume containing *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, after having had it transcribed from the copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale and then typed out, he tried to tone it down, or distract the reader's attention, by changing "*Mon Âme*" into "*L'Âme de Victor Hugo*". But he must have thought his readers rather inattentive if he supposed they were not going to notice that two syllables are missing from:

Ignoring these ians*

and that "*génie universel*", in the penultimate verse, does not really rhyme with "Victor Hugo"...

For the publication of 1932, Roussel preceded the poem with a "three-line preface": "One night I dreamt that I saw Victor Hugo working at his desk; this is what I read when I leaned over his shoulder." In 1895 and 1897, he did not have to make this effort, even in a dream. It was definitely his soul and not Victor Hugo's which was that "strange factory" where slaves hammer out verses; crowds on the edge of the abyss sing a canticle which magnifies:

My poems, my glory and me.

Meanwhile, I continue to tame
Each suddenly arising rhyme
Which bangs against the barrier
By giving it its place in time.

His veins "where blows rain" and the "hard beating of [his] pulse" make it clear to the inspired poet that this factory is definitely his own! He complains of the difficulties he feels when trying to write good poetry and at the same time trying to hold back the force of his imagination. At the age of seventeen, Roussel's excessively fertile imagination stopped him from sleeping.

Without our noticing it, Roussel has already confided to us the way he composes poetry: "The rhymes springing forth in plenty", he tames them "by quickly finding them their place"; and we see the workers in the factory grabbing "lines already partially formed". That is what some of Roussel's manuscripts look like: lists of rhymes plucked out of the air, and poems sketched in around them before being written up properly.

For the publication of his first book, Raymond Roussel had turned to Alphonse

* "Roussellians" being implied.

Lemerre, a fashionable publisher; the same rationale made him choose *Le Gaulois*, where Arthur Meyer had recently become editor-in-chief; what is more, Mme Roussel subscribed to *Le Gaulois*.

It is not impossible that Raymond Roussel's father and grandfather, the lawyer in Évreux, had known Arthur Meyer (born in Le Havre in 1844) when he occupied the post of private secretary to Le Havre's prefect, Janvier de La Motte, just before the general elections of 1869. Then, in 1870, Meyer became under-secretary of the Comité du plébiscite, whose vice-president, whom he accompanied to the imperial court, was the Duc d'Albuféra; indeed, one of the sisters of Charles Ney, Roussel's childhood friend and future brother-in-law, was to marry another Duc d'Albuféra. The Roussel family had close ties with the Murat family (as Raymond was keen to point out in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*) about whom Arthur Meyer was full of praise.* The world of imperial Jewish finance was also involved, and Charles de Breteuil's mother was a member of the wealthy Fould family. Better still: "To have my newspaper," wrote Meyer, "I needed money. To earn enough, I stayed away from the press for almost ten years. I worked on the Stock Market." There, he came to know — or met up with again — a stockbroker called Eugène Roussel. Raymond could also have been introduced to Meyer by Paul Bourget, who was on friendly terms with Charles de Breteuil and his wife, Germaine.

In 1911, by which time *Le Gaulois* and *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* had already published several of Roussel's works, Arthur Meyer wrote: "With the assistance of top-ranking authors, I have endeavoured to make *Le Gaulois* into a salon frequented by women and where they can even bring their daughters. People made fun of *Le Gaulois* saying that it was trying to be a branch office of the Académie française. This criticism, I must say, made me feel rather proud." Yet Arthur Meyer was certainly not thinking about Raymond Roussel when he wrote this, but about Paul Bourget, who was a member of the Academy.

It was thus neither chance nor personal taste that led Raymond Roussel to apply to Arthur Meyer's *Le Gaulois* and Lemerre. In both cases, he was still in his milieu. Given how much Roussel respected etiquette, all he could do was choose the newspaper his family read and the publisher of a fashionable novelist who was a friend of his mother and sister.

Arthur Meyer's salon on Rue Drouot, where conservative-minded members and possible future members of the Academy met, was decorated with watercolours by Madeleine Lemaire. There, François Coppée rubbed shoulders not only with Paul Bourget, but also with René Bazin, Albert de Mun, Maurice Barrès, Denys Cochin, Émile Ollivier, and Ernest Daudet. The master of the house shamelessly requested copies of their works printed on fine paper and asked fashionable painters to illustrate them with watercolours in the margins.†

In 1879, on the day when he bought *Le Gaulois* from Tarbé, Meyer had been

* Arthur Meyer, *Ce que mes yeux ont vu*, Plon-Nourrit, 1911.

† The catalogue of Arthur Meyer's library, which was auctioned at the Hôtel Drouot in June 1924, has a preface by Édouard Rahir, who remarks: "M. Arthur Meyer became a bibliophile rather late in life. Since he possessed quite a large number of autographed letters from famous literati, artists or politicians with whom he had done business, he made up his mind to insert them into books where they would be at home. This was how his collection started." And he must have relied on the best booksellers to guide him in his choices! To the 607 volumes in his possession must be added over 3000 drawings and fifteen paintings. Among the religious works was a 1543 Bible, a 1480 *Psalterium*, an eighteenth-century translation of Confucius, a seventeenth-century manuscript of the Koran and a translation of the Rig Veda, but none of the Judaica that one might expect. Above all, Meyer adored illustrated books, which he filled with original drawings and autographs (Cornille, Chénier, Pascal, Racine, etc., the signatures of Rabelais and Molière). There are no surprises among the nineteenth-century literary works. Without always having the best, he seems to have avoided the worst. In any case, there was no trace of the books Raymond Roussel sent to him with dedications, especially *Locus Solus*: "With compliments to M. Arthur Meyer, from the grateful writer".

obliged to give up the idea of turning it into a Bonapartist paper: the imperial prince had just fallen in Zululand. "My decision was made at once. *Le Gaulois* would remain dynastic, but the only possible dynasty left was the descendants of Henri IV. I would make *Lc Gaulois* into a royalist newspaper." There were to be further U-turns. Confronted by the Dreyfusard *Figaro*, Arthur Meyer took the opposite position, despite being a Jew himself. "I am Jewish," he said, "or, rather, I was Jewish! Just measure the distance from Israel to the Capetians!" On another occasion, in the presence of Gabriel Astruc, he moaned: "Oh, you Israelites..."

He was not wrong. His bourgeois or noble readership, being conservative and monarchist, was anti-semitic. Raymond Roussel himself happily played along with the stereotypes. Thus, for example, he thinks that people are less likely to recognise a noble person by his gait, than

A pure Israelite, from his chubby lips
Red-rimmed eyes, the way his regal nose dips.*

The funniest thing would be to give

A Jew a false nose droller than his own.†

And

... in fact, who was Jacob?
But one who upped a birth right like any
Snob, which Esau, snob too, mourned as he ate.‡

These clichés will suffice to illustrate the crude anti-Semitism Roussel learnt from his family's milieu. We shall also see the Jew Isaac Zabulon appear in a manuscript of *Locus Solus*; and the episode with Booz Lévy (*The Star on the Forehead*, Act II, scene IV) gives a final touch to the picture, with "this little Jew" who becomes the "fabulously rich owner of an immense factory" producing clyster-pipes and who is the hero of a frankly scatological story.

Whereas:

— The young author {wonders}
How long he must pay to publish his books.

1. Glory detests fresh looks.
2. For a worker's goods to be respected
Many decades must pass across his head;
The shady oak becomes a prosperous thing
When its trunk is marked with many a ring.§

* *New Impressions of Africa.*

† *Ibid.*

‡ *Ibid.*

§ *Ibid.*

Raymond Roussel, who was a member of the class of '97, was called up before the army recruitment board, which found him "fit for active service".

The keen eyes that examined him noted:

hair and eyebrows brown
eyes brown, forehead ordinary
nose average, mouth average
chin round, face oval
height: 1.7 m
No "distinguishing marks".

With such a description, Raymond Roussel was sure to go unnoticed. However, the secretary in the recruitment office had wavered. He had first of all noted down: *long nose* and *large mouth*, then crossed these out and replaced them with more anonymous descriptions. The adjective "average" was created for the army's use.

In fact, we know that Roussel's eyes were very dark and his hair an extremely dark brown. But we should not be over-demanding. It is already sufficiently surprising that he was judged "fit for active service" in the very same year he had had his attack of depression! He could easily have been rejected, or else put into the reserves. And if the army Drs had not noticed his condition, then his mother's influence could see to it that he was stationed somewhere quiet.

Raymond Roussel was told to join his unit on 15 November the following year.

II
IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA
1898-1911



THE YEARS OF PROSPECTING

It would be interesting to know who should take the credit for the miracle that occurred — could it have been Dr Janet? — for Raymond Roussel did not give up literature. His books might have been completely ignored, “but what does their success or failure matter? It may postpone other people’s external acknowledgement of his glory, but it does not lessen its reality”. Dr Janet added: “His judgement is quite reliable on other subjects. As regards the rest of his conduct, he is certainly modest, shy even. Far from being an agitated person, he is rather in a state of depression with a tendency to obsessions and a weakening of the will. This conviction regarding glory is not related to any current psychological condition, but is the residue of a much earlier psychological disturbance, which alone can explain it.” But Janet investigated no further.

While waiting to join the 72nd Infantry regiment in Amiens the following year, “I started working again,” Roussel wrote, “but more calmly than during my terrible bout of overwork. For a few years, I busied myself with prospecting.” We have now reached a long period of ten years, from 1898 to 1908, during which Roussel wrote two lengthy, unpublished texts, *La Seine* and *Les Noces*, as well as *Textes-Genèse* and *La Vue*.

Amongst the piles of manuscripts kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale, two stand out: a verse play called *La Seine*, and a novel called *Les Noces*, or rather, 20,000 lines describing how a young couple called Claude and Luce wander through Paris, finally ending up at the theatre. Neither of these texts, nor any of the others that have been discovered, seems to match those referred to in the note attached to *Mon Âme* when it was published in *Le Gaulois* in 1897. What is more, in *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, Roussel recalls how it was right after the attack of exhaustion caused by writing *La Doublure* that he started his “prospecting”. For, he added: “none of my works satisfied me, except *Chiquenaude* which I published in 1900”. What “works” is he talking about? *La Seine* and *Les Noces*? There is no indication, for: “After *La Vue*, I also wrote *Le Concert* and *La Source*, then I returned to my prospecting for a few years [hence then about twenty-five years old], during which time I published only [in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*] *L’Inconsolable* and *Têtes de Carton du Carnaval de Nice*. This prospecting was not without its torments and I would even roll around on

the floor in fits of rage, feeling that I would never manage to procure the sort of artistic sensations to which I aspired."

"Only" *L'Inconsolable* and *Têtes de Carton du Carnaval de Nice*? Does this imply that there were others, perhaps *La Seine* and *Les Noces*? Nothing proves this, either. *La Seine*, the only completed text, was far too long for Arthur Meyer's newspaper. But if these reams of verse did not procure the sort of "artistic sensations" that their author was seeking, then there was presumably no question of their ever being published. Further support for this view comes from the lack of any date. If Roussel had thought these poems worth publishing, then he would certainly have rounded them off with a date that would, as is the case with *La Doublure*, have stood at the end of the work.

Testing for the possible presence of a Rousselian "procedure" in these manuscripts hardly takes us any further. In the case of *La Seine*, there is an obvious pun in the title [*la scène*, the stage], which could refer to Act II which takes place at the Moulin Rouge; but it is also the name of the river and of the *département* where all of the action occurs — Montmartre, the Bois de Boulogne and the embankments. With his *Chroniquettes* of 1897, Roussel had already shown his liking for puns, but these ones do not advance our cause.

It is more interesting to note that, after publishing a verse novel, a form which appealed neither to the public nor to the critics, with *La Seine* Roussel switched to a genre which was considered fashionable, the verse play. The year of *La Doublure*'s failure was also the year of success for Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Until recently, it was thought that the failure of his novels had led Roussel to try his hand at theatre, and even to giving his novels a second chance by adapting them for the stage, as he himself had implied. The existence of *La Seine* refutes this hypothesis and shows that Roussel's links with the theatre were much more complex. Despite appearances to the contrary, his play in fact defies conventional rules. Act II, which takes place in the Moulin Rouge, is a challenge:

The concert hall in the Moulin Rouge. The audience is facing towards the right; the stage and the orchestra are invisible. Further away, behind, the illuminated wheel of the Moulin Rouge can be seen turning. It is June.

When the curtain comes up, the orchestra plays a flourish, as though rounding off a song.

That is all we shall hear or see: not the show being performed at the Moulin Rouge, not the singer whose ballad finishes just before the curtain rises, not the orchestra. At least the audience does not have their backs to us!

While awaiting a first performance of this play, it must be said that reading this second act creates a strange impression. This seems to derive from the fact that the dialogues between Raoul and Jeanne, who are in fact the only important characters in terms of the action, sound as though they were "inclusions" in dialogues between

other characters, forming such an interlocking mesh of chopped-up alexandrines that we lose track of how many people are talking, and what about.

It is these manuscripts, and especially *Les Noces*, which tell us the most about Raymond Roussel's working methods. For instance, they contain lists of rhyming pairs:

*branche penche lointain incertain mal assurée figurée niveau nouveau verticales égales couleur
pâleur utile île regards épars ordinaire lunaire éclatant entend*

Then comes the pencil-draft stage, where the rhyming pairs are used as frames scribbled down on the white sheet of paper as if scraps of meaningful lines... which would then simply have to be padded out!

<i>Vous ne voudrez pas non plus que</i>	<i>naissance</i>
<i>De Mathieu</i>	<i>et que n'importe quel bavard</i>
<i>puisse le traiter</i>	<i>de bâtard</i>
<i>il n'est pas</i>	<i>possible</i>
<i>qu'il se serve de</i>	<i>cible*</i>

There is no reason to think that Roussel became fed up with this toil, which would have wearied many a man, as the rediscovered manuscripts of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* demonstrate. But when he realised that his "procedure" could open up a marvellous world of fantasy to him, Roussel decided to use it for prose in order to write his great mature works.

"While still very young, I used to write tales of a *few pages' length* by using this procedure." He is thus not referring to *Chroniquettes*, but to his *Textes de grande jeunesse ou Textes-Genèse* which he had kept and which was published at the end of his posthumous book. Roussel had already very nearly revealed his procedure in this "Note" in the fourth canto of *New Impressions of Africa*:

How a word's strength varies with its setting!
A *flash* can be of thunderous lightning,
Or the reflection from a penknife's blade.

By saying that the word's "strength" changes and not its meaning, Roussel attributed a "power" to his words. This is what he meant to demonstrate in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*: "I chose two almost identical words (one thinks of metagrams). For example *billard* [billiards, billiard table] and *pillard* [bandit]" — these refer to the first *Texte-Genèse*, entitled *Parmis les noirs*, which begins as follows:

Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard formaient un incompréhensible assemblage †

* Nor would you want that birth
Of Mathieu and that any chatter-
box
could call him a bastard
it is not possible
for him to be used as a target

† The letters of [made by] the
white [chalk] on the cushions of
the old billiard table formed an
incomprehensible array.

and finishes:

*LES LETTRES... DU... BLANC... SUR... LES... BANDES... DU... VIEUX... PILLARD.**

The expression *Textes-Genèse* implies that these texts contain the genesis, germs and roots of Roussel's later works, as if (and therein lies the entire point of the "procedure") form mattered more than substance. The first three of these *Textes-Genèse* are early versions of later works. They were worked on and modified until Roussel thought them worthy of publication: *Nanon* in 1907, *Unc Page du Folk-Lore Breton* in 1908, and *Impressions d'Afrique* in 1909. If *Parmi les noirs* is not the earliest of the *Textes-Genèse*, it is certainly the one that left the deepest marks on Roussel, since he gives it as the first example of his procedure, and because it is the embryo of *Impressions d'Afrique*. The other *Textes-Genèse* were not so fortunate. *Les Anncaux du gros serpent à sonnettes* [The rings of the large rattlesnake] is the first version of *Nanon* (the second of the *Citations documentaires*), which was published in *Lc Gaulois du Dimanche* in 1907; but the first and last sentences generated by the procedure are different.

Lcs Tachcs de la laine [The stains on the wool] is the first version of *Unc Page du Folk-Lore Breton* (third of the *Citations documentaires*), which was published in *Lc Gaulois du Dimanche* in 1908; once again the first and last sentences are slightly different. The actual page of Breton folklore (that is to say, the poem called *Lc Serment de John Glover*) is much shorter in the earlier text, where it appeared as part of a group of texts accompanying an *image d'Épinal* entitled "Breton Legend". Do we need to add that there is nothing "Breton" or even Celtic about these two poems, both of which are light years away from the poems of Auguste Brizeux or the songs of *Barzaz Breiz*, which Raymond Roussel might well have read?

If the other *Textes-Genèse* reveal little or nothing about when they were written, we can still observe the constant presence of a particular character: the painter who carefully sketches out the scene, only to be pulled up by the narrator. The last sentence of each tale ("almost identical" to the first one) always deals with some inexactitude "flying in the face of the most basic realism", as Roussel put it in *La Régularité des mailles*. Of the seventeen *Textes-Genèse*, eight are constructed in this manner (*Lcs Tachcs de la laine*, *L'Orchestre*, *La Loge*, *La Régularité des mailles*, *La Halte*, *La Frange d'or de la petite Paulette*, *La Peau de la raie* and *La Suprématic des clous*); one is based on a modified painting (*Lc Haut de la figure*), while another three are about texts written in chalk on a billiard table (*Parmi les noirs*), with coloured pencils by a trained dog (*Idylle funambulesque*), or in chalk on two slates (*Les Ardoises*).

* The letters of the white [man] on [concerning] the troops of the old bandit.

OF GAMES AND DOGS

These *Textes-Genèse* also provide us with a little biographical information. In them, as in *La Doublure*, we learn that Roussel regularly went to the annual fair in Neuilly, *Fête à Neu-Neu*, which then attracted all of Paris. He would always remain fascinated by acrobats, showmen and side-shows. He also provides us with details of games, for example the order of the colours on the handle of a croquet mallet — blue, pink, brown, yellow, green, red, black and orange (*Idylle funambulesque*). Elsewhere, he points out that “the handle of a *queue* [billiard cue] sometimes bears the *chiffre* [initials] of its owner; hence the *chiffre* [number]” marked on the *queue* [train] of Talu the bandit’s robe. These two games were familiar to those who frequented the salons and lawns of the villa in Neuilly. But Roussel also played other sports: “He played real tennis... you know, that sport which was fashionable at the time... He was very good at it... He was very good at whatever he did or undertook,” his nephew Michel Ney would later say. In *The Slates*, Roussel does indeed show that he was familiar with “real-tennis strokes” and the places where it was played:

In Deauville there stands a large building of simple design which greatly resembles the one that may be seen in Paris in the Tuileries, just opposite Rue Cambon. As in Paris, here was played that ball-game which is so interesting and varied that lawn-tennis is a mere vulgar imitation of it. For, in the open air and on grass, a ball is hit back and forth like a shuttlecock, and neither one’s cunning nor one’s accuracy is satisfied. But what a difference when the ball can bounce along roofs and off walls, win by falling into the *ouverts*, or lead astray even the most agile player by going off course on the *tambour*!

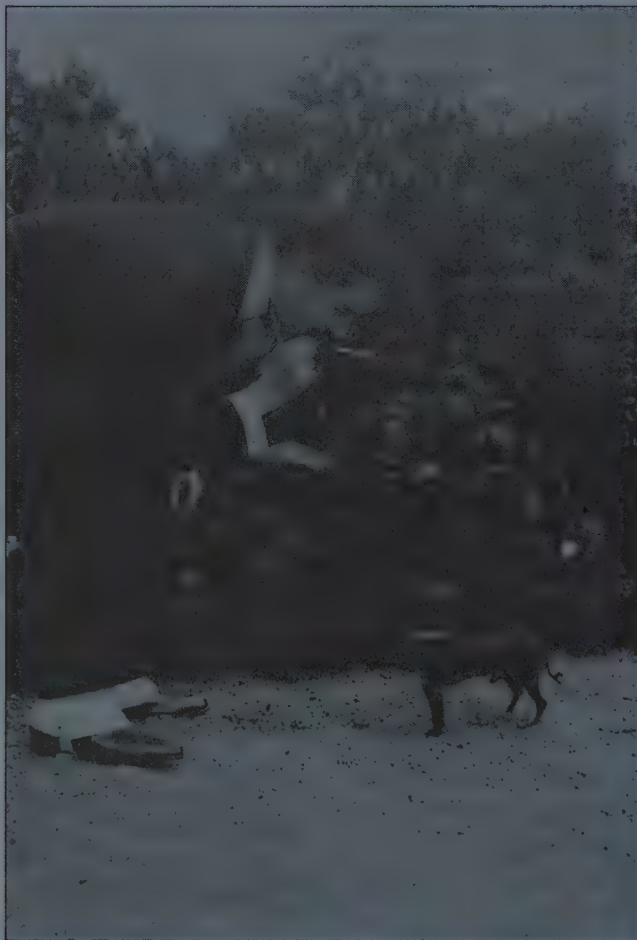
I had been playing this sport in Paris for several years, and had reached a good amateur level.

These enthusiastic lines ring true. But, despite Roussel’s scorn for lawn-tennis, he still presumably played it from time to time, for want of anything better to do, on the courts in the gardens of the family house.

In *Circus Idyll*, he mentions his intention to buy a trained dog:

Without hesitation, I had declared that I liked Jais and wanted to buy him. They all cried out saying that the dog that could write was their bread and butter and never would they be separated from him. But I insisted, saying that I would pay any price for him.

For Raymond Roussel, the price did not matter when it came to obtaining what he desired. Instead of Jais, the Writing Dog, did he not buy his dog Pipo in the same way and on a whim? This was a dog that smoked a pipe or, rather, that held a pipe firmly between its teeth, much to visitors’ surprise. We have a photograph of it in the gardens of the villa in Neuilly in 1912, with Michel Ney, who was still a child.



As for Michel Leiris, he remembered coming to tea at the Roussels' with his parents and being astonished to see the dog on the doorstep. His elder sister, Juliette,* saw it, and a slightly worried Robert de Montesquiou also drew attention to its presence in the garden.

The Roussel family loved dogs, and a certain number of them, nice without exception, can be found in Raymond Roussel's books. In the 1910s, his sister Germaine was never seen without a papillon spaniel called Boboche. But it was above all their mother who was a great collector of toy lap-dogs and who loved being photographed with them. In the days just before she died, her only concern was to bring over from England a couple of these tiny dogs, for which she had had special baths plumbed into her villa in Biarritz. Raymond willingly played along with his mother's affectations and he is shown in one photograph leaning over one of these living miniatures, which hardly comes up to his ankle. It was no doubt him as well who lent his pen to one of Mme Roussel's little dogs to wish her a good name-day:

To ma theer gran muzzer
To whish here ah.
mary nemdey
Liddle doggikins.

As for cats, they are never mentioned. And those that appear in Raymond Roussel's books generally have a hard time of it.

WHAT PROCEDURE, IN FACT?

Regarding the *Textes-Genèse*, we know thanks to the introductory note to *Documents to Serve as an Outline* that Roussel wanted "the initials [to] be replaced with names, by filling in the blanks", and this was done with the exception of the "beginning". The same goes for another posthumous text, *Flio*. On the other hand, in the same volume that contains the *Documents*, Roussel

also published two *Textes-Genèse*, one of which has characters who are indicated only by initials (*La Suprématie des clous*), while the second does not even have initials, just blank spaces. Thus, in his “early youth”, while using his procedure in an elementary way, Roussel still lacked a technique for giving his characters names. But this was one field in which he certainly was not lacking in imagination! What is difficult to understand is why he either chose totally “made-up” names assembled from various parts and which bear no resemblance to any names actually existing, or else names so bizarre that it is hard to imagine anybody actually being so called. For example, in a short text such as *Les Taches de la laine*, how can a little shepherd be called “Belfry”, a talented painter “Boxroom”, a boy “Pudding” and a five-legged sheep “Frost”? The instructions to Zo concerning the illustration for a page of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* — “a man apparently laboriously drawing up a list of names (if the names are visible, they must be encoded)” — immediately make us think of Roussel himself.

Roussel’s explanation of the “procedure” in *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres* is so clear that we need not go over it again. We can accept it for what it is at face value, or on the other hand we can suspect that Roussel is hiding something, and indeed that is one of the pleasures of being a Rousselian. The procedure he adopted is in fact a method for building your own “word traps” (what he called “having found my way through combinations of words”), or rather “idea traps” made of words that have previously been “trapped”.

The “classic” procedure, according to Michel Ney, consists of three phases of construction: the first step is to find puns or sentences with double meanings, which are sometimes reminiscent of holoryhmes;* then, a logical connection is found to link these incongruous items; finally, the text is written up as rigorously and realistically as possible.

When he discovered it, Roussel thought that “this procedure is, in the end, related to rhyme”. He listed the books in which it had been used, then stated: “It goes without saying that my other books, *La Doublure*, *La Vuc* and *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, are completely untouched by the procedure”. These three are all in verse, as if for Roussel, who found that “verse came easily”, it was a matter of discovering a way to produce “reluctant” prose. It was no doubt pleasing to his musical ear to identify in his prose the counterpoints of his procedure, without any need to resort to the echoes of rhyme.

We should like to point out in passing that the procedure described by Roussel in a work whose title is perfectly clear, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, is a procedure for *writing* which, he says, future authors may be able to use. It is not a *reading* procedure; it is not at all necessary for the reader to be in the know. On the contrary, such knowledge might brake or even stop the reading. The writer who best understood Raymond Roussel’s lesson was Michel Leiris:

* (p.62) Michel Leiris’s “sister” was in fact his first cousin and Eugène Leiris’s adopted daughter; on marrying she became Mme Jannet, and we shall frequently refer to her later on by this name (with a double “n”); she must not be confused with Dr Pierre Janet (with just one “n”).

* In a tale entitled “*Maboulite holorimeuse*” (*Gil Blas*, 28 May 1892), Alphonse Allais used holorhymed couplets to create miniature plots.

The fact of making oneself the voluntary slave of a hard and complicated rule, on which it is necessary to concentrate one's attention and ignore one's surroundings, causes a freeing of the unconscious which is more real than in the pure and simple abandonment of automatic writing. Perhaps because this concentration of the attention on some futile point lifts inhibitions more effectively than passivity or the attempt to empty one's mind.*

Raymond Roussel's health had greatly improved, because he once more attended the Carnival. However, an accident delayed his return to Paris, and on Saturday 26 February 1898, at half past seven in the morning, he sent a wire from Valence station to his mother in the Hôtel Métropole in Monte Carlo to reassure her:

I did not receive the slightest cut or bruise in the collision between the night train and the goods train. I'm wiring you so that you won't be worried when you hear about the accident. I shall arrive in Paris this evening at about six o'clock...

This was undoubtedly not the right approach, for Marguerite Roussel became hysterical, and he had to send her another telegram from Paris that evening:

I swear to you that I haven't the slightest scratch. Good to hear you're better.
Affectionately,
Raymond.

The next day, Raymond wrote his mother a long letter to tell her all about the accident:

Sunday [27 February 1898]

My dear mamma,

As I told you yesterday, and as Mme Cassellari has no doubt confirmed, I escaped unscathed; but it would be no idle boast to say that I survived by the skin of my teeth.

I had been in bed for about an hour in the double sleeping-compartment I was occupying alone, when I was suddenly thrown to the floor with unimaginable speed and amidst a noise the like of which I have never heard before, feeling as though the walls of the compartment were closing in to crush me. For five seconds, I sincerely believed that I was done for. We had just collided *at full speed* with an almost stationary goods train that was totally destroyed, the wagons tearing one another apart, or clambering up on top of one another. One of them was completely upright, stuck up in the air on the corner of a second one. When I went down on to the track, there were people screaming with fear, while others were crying from sheer emotion; a baby had been thrown down on top of its nanny. The goods train was full of sacks of wheat which were all in shreds; the wheat had been scattered over the tracks and in certain places it came halfway up our legs. There were scraps of wood and iron, wheels and debris from the wagons everywhere covering a radius of twenty metres. All of the telegraph wires were swaying from the knocks they had received from flying objects. Fortunately, the night train, being made up of very long and very solid carriages, was not crushed like a fly in a book as an ordinary one would have been. But it would seem that had it been a train with seats, rather than one with sleeping-compartments, we would all have been reduced to strawberry jam. There was just one of the drivers whose face had been severely cut by a window and who could no longer move. Everyone else had only a few cuts and bruises. The walls between

* Roussel l'Ingénu.

compartments were cracked in places, but we were able to complete the journey in the same carriage, once we had disengaged it and backed up two stations to find some points. I would have liked to have some magnesium and a camera to be able to take a snapshot.

I hope that, since your temperature has gone down, you were able to get up yesterday and eat a little more easily.

I have written to Diémer to apologise for missing the lesson and to thank him for the lodge. Tell Ger[maine] that I will run her two errands tomorrow myself, since today Sargenton [his father's successor] and Boucheron [the jeweller at 26, Place Vendôme] are closed. With one thousand tender kisses,

Raymond.

I have only a cold, but I have still written to Chéron,* as you told me to do, asking him to come this morning or tomorrow morning.

In 1898, Roussel had entered his fifth year of piano studies and played at the *Conservatoire's* evening concerts, in particular on 23 May with a Théodore Dubois *Cavatine*, a *Nocturne* by Chopin and an *Étude* by Jacquard; his teacher, Louis Diémer, also participated, as did two of his mother's friends, Rose Caron and Lucien Fugère. For the concert of 12 June, Raymond Roussel (second certificate of merit in 1896, the programme points out) played a Chopin *Barcarolle*, *Galatea* by Dubois and Balakirew's *Islamey*.

After the examination of 14 June, with the same pieces by Chopin and Balakirew, his teacher made the following observations: "Excellent pupil, highly remarkable qualities as a pianist, has made enormous progress". For the competitive examination of 21 July, he played Chopin's *First Scherzo* and the last movement of Beethoven's *Sonata in F Major*. A panel headed by Théodore Dubois and consisting of Gabriel Fauré, Gabriel Pierné, H. Dallier, Antonin Marmontel, Léon Delafosse, Auzende, Georges Falkenberg, Risler and Bourgeat, awarded him the first-class certificate of merit. The notes Théodore Dubois took during the session talk of "generally good qualities, sometimes a little harsh, fairly singing, but not good enough for a 1st prize. See this p.m. — 2nd Prize or 1st certificate". His nephew Michel Ney recalled: "Actually he was furious, because he wanted the first prize." All the same, the press talked of his success. *Le Gaulois* of 23 July:

In the list of awards given during the *Conservatoire* piano competition can be seen the name of M. Roussel, with the first-class certificate of merit. M. Roussel, a pupil of M. Diémer, is both a poet and a musician.

As a musician, he has just distinguished himself on the ivory keyboard; as a poet, he has on several occasions [?] given *Le Gaulois* some of his beautiful verses, which have been greatly appreciated by our readers. If the piano ever leads him towards composition, he will then be able to write his own poems or librettos to be set to his own music.

And in *Le Sport* of 28 July, there was praise all round:

In the piano competition, mention should be made of the first-class certificate of merit

* Dr Henri Chéron, 35, Rue de la Bienfaisance, Paris, seems at the time to have been the Roussel family doctor. He was to receive a signed copy of *Locus Solus*: "to Dr Henri Chéron, the enlightened thinker from whom the author requests much indulgence for the boldness of his scientific fancies, affectionately".



Roussel in uniform, towards the end of 1900.

brilliantly won by M. Raymond Roussel, who is well known in high society and whose mother, Mme Charles [sic] Roussel, has one of the most elegant salons in Paris.

Mme Roussel cannot have been flattered by this mistake with her husband's first name, even if in Paris, at the time, there was a state councillor called Charles Roussel!

MEETING WITH JULES VERNE, CHIQUENAUDE

This was to be the last mention of Raymond Roussel at the *Conservatoire*. He never returned there again. On 15 November 1898, he was sent to the 72nd Infantry Regiment in Amiens, and enrolled with the number 11,943. Now completely recovered from his depression of the year before, he got to know of the French army's barracks.

Raymond Roussel has been called eccentric, but he never tried to avoid a civic duty; national service was one of the obligations he scrupulously respected, and like everyone else at that time, he did three years' service. His generosity meant that his fellow soldiers benefited from his wealth and learnt to respect him.

A forced two-year stay in Amiens presented Roussel with the opportunity of meeting Jules Verne, one of the writers he most admired: "I had the honour of being received by him in Amiens, where I was doing my national service, and of shaking the hand that had written so many immortal works."

It may be supposed that the two of them did not simply "shake hands", as Roussel put it. De Amicis [a famous Italian writer of children's books] visited Jules Verne in 1895 [just three years before] with his two sons; the French novelist spoke of his work "absent-mindedly", being more interested in looking after his two "young visitors" who were with the Italian writer.* It is probable that things were rather different with Roussel. For the first time, without a doubt, he was up against a lad of twenty who knew his work inside out, that is to say had read more than just the adventure stories and scientific predictions. He had such a clear understanding of Jules Verne's "composition procedures" that he had made systematic use of them himself in texts written several years before this visit.†

* Roland Dorgelès once told Raymond Queneau that, during his youth in Amiens, he had been told to steer clear of "the old fellow".

† Marcel Moré, *Le Très Curieux Jules Verne*, Gallimard, 1960.

Marcel Moré has run away with himself. Roussel never said that he had used his

procedures “several years” prior to 1898, nor that these procedures were the same as Jules Verne’s! True, his “admiration for him [was] infinite”, as we shall see. At that time, he had certainly read those of Verne’s books he mentions: *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Around the Moon*, *The Mysterious Island* and *Hector Servadac*, all of which influenced him deeply, and others too that he had forgotten, such as *The Green Ray* (whose title appears in the first line of the *Texte-Genèse* called *La Peau de la raie*), or *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

It seems that Roussel’s national service did not completely interrupt his literary activities. But, before publishing more work, he was to learn that Comte Charles de Breteuil and his sister Germaine had had a serious gig accident. Charles, a dragoon lieutenant aged thirty-seven, received a skull fracture and later died at his home (or, rather, at his mother-in-law’s house) on Rue de Chaillot on 27 December 1899.* Germaine was widowed at the age of twenty-six, with a six-year-old son. She received a long letter of condolence from Paul Bourget.

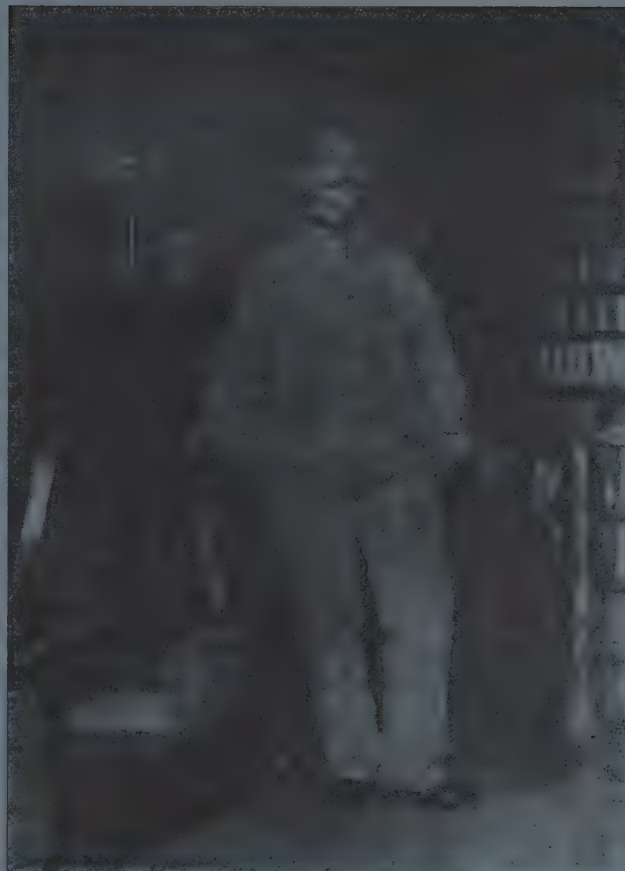
On 21 August, Charles de Breteuil had made a will at the Château de Breteuil. He left his wife “all that the law allows me to leave her”. At least to begin with, Germaine was to keep the Château in coparcenery (as confirmed by the registries). Charles de Breteuil added: “I ask my dear Germaine to choose Robert’s guardian from either my brother, Henri, or her brother, Georges”.

Germaine was devastated and, all her life, kept a photograph of her first husband by her bedside. She shut herself up in Rue de Chaillot and concentrated her energies entirely on her son and her elder brother, whose declining health was becoming preoccupying.

Raymond Roussel, says Michel Ney: “reacted in quite unpredictable ways. For example, when doing his national service, he joined the brass band... He had a word with the band leader... and started playing the cornet.”

“The cornet?” [Juliette Jannet pointed out that it was not the cornet, but the tuba. This cumbersome instrument can be seen next to Raymond Roussel in a photograph in which he is wearing fatigues and a forage-cap.]

“Yes, he pretended to blow into a cornet... He’d never learnt how to play the



Roussel in fatigues, with tuba, 1900.

* The witnesses of this death were the elder brother of the deceased, Henri, Marquis de Breteuil, and Jean de La Rochefoucauld, his brother-in-law. The latter lived with his parents-in-law at 64, Avenue Marceau, Paris, where, according to registries of the period, Charles de Breteuil and his wife, Germaine Roussel, also lived. Germaine was to keep this flat on until her mother's death in 1911 (Charles Ney, her second husband, lived there until at least 1908). It was not a town house, and other tenants shared it. Later, the Prince de Falmignole and his princess, née May

Ephrussi, were to live there. The building remains unchanged, apart from the addition of attic rooms. It is today the headquarters of the Association France-Israel.

instrument.”

“How odd.”

“Indeed... But he loved playing jokes.”

By sharing these “memories” of events that had occurred before he was born, Roussel’s nephew is letting his imagination take over; and Roussel has no need of this sort of story-telling. He might have loved jokes (we have other examples), but he was not some character in a comic novel; he had far too much respect for conventions, and never tried to get himself discharged from the army, even though his state of health and friends in high places would have made it possible. In fact, all he did was to write to Colonel Eugène Chabaud,* aide-de-camp of the President of the Republic, Émile Loubet, to request a transfer. He asked for Paris, but was given Versailles. On Sunday 11 April 1899, he wrote from Amiens: “I am still doing practically nothing here; this is a preparation for Paris, where I hope to do nothing whatsoever.” Then, a few days later, he was told that he was to be transferred on 21 May! However, on Sunday 19 July, while complaining of the bad weather in Carlsbad, he wrote to his mother: “I continue to carry out my national service with that sense of duty you know so well.” It was only as a result of regimental orders on 10 September 1900 that he left the 72nd Regiment and was transferred to the 1st Regiment of Military Engineers. He arrived at his unit, based in Versailles, on 13 September 1900 (regimental number 2911), and it was only then that he was designated a “military bandsman”; which proves that the French army had finally got round to recognising his abilities. Whether a cornet or a tuba, it is sure that, even in the Engineers, soldiers do not parade to the sound of a piano. Roussel called for Chabaud’s intervention once again in January 1901, but was told that his colonel did not want to lose him! It was not every day that one had a virtuoso pianist to hand, who could perform wonders on the town’s bandstand (and at his wife’s receptions!), and he was unwilling to let Roussel go: “It seems that you cannot be replaced and that the question of public concerts is of capital importance.” But being stationed here certainly suited Roussel. This infantryman “with striking red trousers” made the most of his proximity to Paris by having Lemerre publish a twenty-four page booklet entitled *Chiquenaude*.† The book’s publication date is given as 23 September 1900 and it was copyrighted on 13 December. Yet it is rather odd that, when writing his posthumously-published book, Roussel forgot this tale’s exact publication date: “published by Alphonse Lemerre in about 1900”; even more so given the fact that in October 1932, *Chiquenaude* was mentioned in *La Bibliographie de la France* as one of Roussel’s books, with a sale price, showing that stocks had still not been exhausted. Roussel’s forgetfulness and, sometimes, his apparent nonchalance should be treated with caution. If he counted *La Doublure* and *Mon Âme* among his early works, it is nevertheless strange that he made no allusion to the thousands of lines of verse which he had kept, and which were rediscovered only in 1989.

What is more, this booklet contains the first, and extremely basic, application of

* A family friend, who can be seen in a photograph riding in the Bois de Boulogne in 1909 with Germaine, then Duchesse d’Elchingen, and the Princesse de Tarente.

† The text begins on page 5 (p^o 1) and ends on p^o 17. Lemerre invoiced the publishing for 104.10 FF on 21 December 1900. *Chiquenaude* was republished as one of the *Citations documentaires* in *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres*.

Roussel's procedure: between two homophonic sentences which open and close the text, he invented a tale to justify them. "It is wrong to look for a connection between my novel *La Doublure* and my tale *Chiquenaude*, for there is none," he claims in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. But it is easy to understand why Roger Vitrac, in 1928, suggested that the beginning of *La Doublure* might be the source for *Chiquenaude*; however, the sole similarities exist between the scene of the action (the theatre) and the identity of a fictitious character (Méphisto). There may be another resemblance: could Gaspard, the character in *La Doublure* who is condemned to being an understudy, and who ends up in Méphisto's costume in the fair at Neuilly, be the nameless character who reappears in *Chiquenaude* as the understudy of Méphisto, the lining [*doublure*] of whose costume has been eaten through by *vers* ["worms" but also "verses"]? But what is most striking, right from the beginning, is the influence of Edmond Rostand. While Roussel was later to claim that he attached little importance to his characters' names (although, in 1900, it is one of them, *Chiquenaude*, who gives her name to the tale), the reader is unsurprised to learn that one of the friends and collaborators of the author who wrote the *vers* of the *doublure* is called Flambeau, as though he had walked straight out of Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, first put on at the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt on 6 March of the same year. As for the "ode" that "dear Gauffre and Flambeau" asked the author to compose, it is evidently influenced by the famous duel ballad in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The conclusion is extremely similar:

... Continue

Foolhardy fantasist

With your plan and I shall crush you

Like a fly with my fist.

One can ask why Roussel decided to pay for this tale to be published, rather than any of the other *Citations documentaires*. He was presumably fairly satisfied with it and felt a momentary jubilation that seemed redolent of a return of his "sensation of glory". But the use of the procedure was new to him; it had previously played no part in the moments of exaltation he had experienced.

How, in passing, had he experienced that sensation while writing *La Doublure*? When did Roussel discover his "genius"? We cannot be far from the truth in situating this moment during the writing of the descriptive passages of the Nice Carnival, in that ability to "write prose in verse". As proof of this, we can advance the way in which Roussel was set on describing the Carnival again in *L'Inconsolable* and in *Têtes de carton du Carnaval de Nice*. These two poems appeared in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* in 1904, which also carried the obsessive descriptions of *La Vue*. *Chiquenaude* was a prose break between current poetic preoccupations. Or else, he may have had it published for the real or imaginary pleasure of his red-trousered comrades in arms. Roussel must have known that the "red heel" was not only a sign



of nobility, but was also used by pamphleteers to designate those officers in the Versailles units who had soaked their boots in the Communards' blood. This double-edged phrase could be applied perfectly to General Marquis de Galliffet,* who was in fact Minister of War in 1899. What is more, Adolphe Willette called him the "Red-heeled Marquis" in a cartoon† published on the front page of *Le Courrier français* in 1899, in which the General can be seen striding across the paving-stones of Place de l'Étoile, with the hands of the victims of the repression of 1871 rising up around him.

Meanwhile, Raymond's brother Georges was weakening daily. His sister, Germaine, the young widow, dedicated herself entirely to him. A fine photograph shows her sitting beside him in the gardens of the villa at Neuilly, while he is resting on a chaise-longue, covered with a blanket and protected from the sun by parasols. In another photograph, taken the same day and in the same place, Princesse Murat, *née* d'Elchingen, and the Marquise de Loÿs-Chandieu, *née* de Pourtalès, pose with their friend beside the dying man. Georges Roussel died of intestinal tuberculosis at the age of thirty-two, still a bachelor, at Neuilly on 21 July 1901. Vicomte Hutteau d'Origny and Charles Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, officially witnessed his death.

"Intestinal tuberculosis" was at the time a catch-all diagnosis, which covered various inflammatory diseases of the digestive tract, as well as cancers of the colon or stomach. Fears of contagion were legitimate, and Mme Roussel was not completely wrong to forbid her elder son access to the house on Rue de Chaillot, where she had taken refuge. The next month, on 21 August, Raymond Roussel was released from service. He was awarded a certificate of good conduct and joined the reserves on 1 November 1901. Thus did he carry out his three years' active service in the army, from 1898 to 1901. But what was his behaviour really like in that man's world? We shall never know.

GERMAINE ROUSSEL, DUCHESSE D'ELCHINGEN

Germaine Roussel had been a widow for two years when she gave in to the insistence of Charles Ney, a friend who had loved her since childhood, and married him on 14 January 1902 at the town hall of the eighth *arrondissement* in Paris.‡ The groom had been born on 8 December 1873, the son of Michel Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, who was already dead by the time of the marriage, and Marguerite

* Marquis Gaston-Alexandre-Auguste de Galliffet (1830-1909), made General in 1870 before the Battle of Sedan, was instructed to put down the insurrection of the Commune. He has the reputation of having drowned it in its blood, but he turned down the cross of a Commander of the *Légion d'honneur*, because he did not want to have earned it by fighting against other Frenchmen. Waldeck-Rousseau summoned him to the Ministry of War, whence he ran the army with iron discipline, imposing silence on all, irrespective of rank.

† Reprinted in Willette's *Œuvres choisies*, Simonis-Empis, 1901.

‡ Marguerite Roussel noted in her diary for 7 February: "Cost of marriage Germaine, half each: 875 FF".

Heine, who for her second husband took Victor Masséna, Duc de Rivoli and Prince d'Essling. Germaine and Charles were the same age. Their witnesses were: Michel Heine, a banker; Napoléon Ney, Prince de la Moskowa and elder brother of the groom, who, in 1898, had married Eugénie, Princesse Bonaparte; Augustin Grimpel, Germaine's uncle by marriage; and Georges Martini, a friend of the bride.

Germaine had had a certain ascendancy over her childhood friend, to such an extent that it was rumoured she sometimes encouraged him in his schoolwork by congratulating or criticising him. From this friendship, an adolescent love developed which Eugène Roussel, a friend of the Prince d'Essling, did nothing to discourage. As for Germaine, she was friends with Charles Ney's sisters, who later became the Princesse Murat and the Duchesse de Camastra, while Georges and Raymond Roussel played with Napoléon and Charles Ney.



Strangely enough [Roussel wrote], nearly all of the big names of the Empire were united in my brother-in-law's family: his half-brother was Prince d'Essling and Duc de Rivoli; his elder sister married Prince Murat, pretender to the throne of Naples; his sisters were: Princesse Eugène Murat, the Duchesse de Camastra, the Duchesse d'Albuféra and the Duchesse de Fézensac.

Roussel also observed that his brother-in-law's brother married HRH Princesse Eugénie Bonaparte, a direct descendant of King Joseph and of Lucien Bonaparte. He could also have said that all the names in his brother-in-law's family are inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe on Place de l'Étoile.

Could a better match have been hoped for? Yet, the very evening of his civil marriage (the religious ceremony took place the next day), the young groom went out on a riotous stag night with friends of both sexes in the clubs on the *grands boulevards*. Germaine was profoundly hurt and never forgave her husband for this first abandonment.

She dreams and dreamt already, when a girl,
Of a well-placed match in a social whirl;
It is neither looks nor wit she requires
From her partner; on this score, she desires
Little, he can be thin, stout, young or grey;
She would willingly take a fiancé,
Fat as an elephant, dense as ox-hide,
If she became an aristocrat's bride;
She would even marry Quasimodo,
If he were sufficiently well to-do.
She has sworn to reach that particular
Rung she covets on the social ladder;
Questions of rank are her true preference,
Of blue blood and uncertain precedence,
Envyng Empresses above the rest.*

* *The Source*, 1903 (*La Vue*).

The Duc and Duchesse d'Elchingen first set up home at 8, Rue Jean-Goujon,* the home of the groom's brother, Napoléon, Prince de la Moskowa; then at 4, Quai Debilly,† until Germaine returned to Rue de Chaillot (Rue Quentin-Bauchart) after her mother's death. In fact, Charles and Germaine soon stopped living together. Charles Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, a member of the Jockey-Club, the Cercle Hoche, the Union Interalliée, the Cercle des Veneurs, the Golf Club of Paris, and future member of the Automobile and Aéro Clubs, went to live at 12, Rue de Lota, in the sixteenth *arrondissement*.

RAYMOND ROUSSEL AND HIS MOTHER

Raymond Roussel now lived alone with his mother. Since the death of her eldest son, she had started to mollycoddle Raymond and, for quite a while, did not want to be separated from him at all. But he did retain a certain independence. He lived more and more wrapped up in himself and avoided the receptions given by his mother. Her diaries show how incompatible Marguerite Roussel's life in society was with her son's work as a writer. For example, from March to October 1902:‡

- 13 March. Departure for Monte Carlo.
- 15. Was in Nice to visit Princesse [d'Essling].
- 21. Visited Princesse d'Essling with [Rose] Caron.
- 23. [Reynaldo] Hahn for dinner.
- 26. Mme Caron's departure.
- 27. Mme Mlle Lemaire's arrival / Hahn for dinner.
- 28. Hahn for dinner.
- 29. Visited Germaine in Nice.
- 1 April. Charles and Germaine for dinner.
- 6. Hahn at Hôtel des Thermes, Dax.
- 7. 2 injections of strychnine, wrote to Ray, Reynaldo Hahn, received letters from Caron, Reynaldo Hahn, telegram to Raymond.
- 9. Arrival at Cannes.
- 14. Grasse.
- 15. Fréjus. Saint-Raphaël.
- 16. Visited Nice.
- 17. Tea in Antibes with Germaine Charles / visited Ger and Charles Hôtel Grimaldi.
- 21. Saw Ger in Nice, tea at Rumpelmayer's [*salon de thé*].
- 25. 1st mandolin lesson.
- 26. 2nd lesson.
- 27. 3rd.
- 3 May. Departure from Cannes.
- 4. Arrival in Paris... Raymond dined with me.
- 18. Dinner. 2 Lemaire, Vtesse Broissia, Nevill, Gabriac, Hahn, Magnan.
- 25. Departure for Neuilly.
- 1 July. Dinner. 2 Hebert, 2 Lemaire, 3 Caron, 1 [Arthur] Meyer, 1 Hahn, 1 Louis Ganderax.
- 17. Princesse de Tarante, Baronne Reille, Baronne Xavier Reille.

* Now the Maison des Centraux.

† Quai de Billy or Debilly became Quai de Tokyo in 1918 then, in 1945, Quai de New-York.

‡ Quoted by Philippe G. Kerbellec: *Raymond Roussel. Au cannibale affable*, Éditions du Rocher, 1994.

- 21. Departure for Dieppe.
- 28. Return from Dieppe.
- 30. Departure for Carlsbad.
- 8 August. *Hans Heiling*.
- 9. Engel Haus.
- 24. Departure from Carlsbad.
- 25. Arrival in Neuilly.
- 10 September. Departure for Biarritz.
- 11. Biarritz. Magnan for dinner.
- 17. Cambo with Augusta Charles and Germaine.
- 18. Fontarabie.
- 21. Sunday: *bull races*.
- 22. Tea in Saint-Jean-de-Luz at Mme de Guadalmina's.
- 24. Game of pelota.
- 25. Telegram to Ray at Fontainebleau.
- 26. Silver lime tree game of pelota.
- 27. Departure of Augusta for Capbreton.
- 9 October. Arrival of Cassellari.
- 16. Biarritz... Bordeaux.
- 17. *Favorite* with Ger Charles (Feodorow).
- 22. *Tannhäuser* Van Dyck with Mme Mlle Caron.

In one of these diaries, Mme Roussel noted, for 5 April 1904: "Lunch with Raymond at Villa Masséna." This must have been quite an event.

The Villa Masséna is situated between the Promenade des Anglais (beside the Négresco) and Rue de France, in the middle of an eight-thousand-square-metre garden. It is now Nice's Museum of Art and History and was built between 1898 and 1901 by an architect called Thiercelin, for Victor Masséna, the grandson of Marshal Masséna. He had married General Ney, the Duc d'Elchingen's widow, Paule Furtado-Heine: her son, the Prince d'Essling, and Charles Ney, Duc d'Elchingen and Germaine's husband, were thus half-brothers on the mother's side, which explains Charles's presence along with his wife's in the two large canvases painted in 1902 by François Flameng in the palace's ceremonial staircase.*

This is how Joseph Saqui described the acquisition of Villa Masséna by the town of Nice:

One morning in February 1917, my old friend Charles Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, who was then on leave in Nice, informed me of the desire of his half-brother André Masséna to sell the villa he had there; André was then serving as a lieutenant in the cavalry. That villa, which had had over sixty servants when his father and mother, the Prince and Princesse d'Essling, were alive, at the time when lavish receptions were given there, had become uninhabitable for him. His parents had previously received their children, their grandchildren and also many friends there [including Empress Eugénie, who only died in 1920]; he was now alone and in the army, and for how much longer?

Rather than risk seeing the villa demolished, André Masséna accepted the idea of

* In these canvases, the different people's names are indicated. In the first, we have in the centre the Princesse d'Essling and her young son, Prince André Masséna, who would inherit the palace; on the right, between two pillars, is the face of the Duchesse d'Elchingen (Germaine Roussel); her husband, Charles Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, also appears between two pillars in the facing canvas on the other side of the staircase. This canvas contains a mystery: in the background, a person, too small to be identifiable, can be seen at the first-floor window of a white house with a terrace, behind a blind, looking at the scene from a distance. This onlooker probably depicts the artist, François Flameng (1856-1923); but, as certain Rousseliens suggest, why not Raymond Roussel?

turning it into a local-history museum. "He officially [?] offered it to the municipality on such generous terms that it was more of a gift than a sale."* The conditions were as follows: the town would "refund" the Prince the death duties that he had paid on the villa, that is 1,100,000 francs; it would undertake to set up a local-history museum inside the villa, which would be called the Musée Masséna; the garden would be maintained and opened to the public. The town of Nice thus paid a sum that was far below the real value of this building and its exceptional site. "The Prince, who simply recouped what he had spent, received no money from the sale; it was thus a real gift from him." It is easy to understand why the opponents of this project, supported by the *Journal de Nice*, put it around that the municipality had taken the villa in exchange for cancelling the Prince's gambling debts.

THE LEIRIS FAMILY

In Paris, Raymond Roussel continued to avoid society, but for years he continued to go every week to see his stockbroker, Eugène Leiris, who had worked as his father's stockbroker and had known Raymond since he was a teenager.

He would arrive at the Leiris's house, 41, Rue d'Auteuil, in the afternoon at about five o'clock and "the little Roussel", "he whom the household called 'Ramuntcho'", (Michel Leiris) would then play the piano. He had a naturally "sweet singing voice" (according to his niece Nicole Lecocq-Vallon), sang in tune and was a bass. "I while away my time with pointless gifts of musical virtuosity", Roussel said in the theatrical version of *Locus Solus*, adapted by Pierre Frondaie. He played Schumann, Schubert, as well as the airs and songs of Reynaldo Hahn,† Augusta Holmès, Xavier Privas, Théodore Botrel, Paul Delmet (*Tout autour de la tour Saint-Jacques*), the *Erlking*, *La Chanson des blés d'or*, or "folk songs arranged by Jacques Dalcroze, such as *Sur la route de Nyon*, or else:

Les fillettes d'Estavayer
Bcau château feuillé, beau château feuillé...

one of the ones I like the best." (Michel Leiris)

He would sing entire operettas or operas on his own, playing all the parts: *Manon*, *Werther*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Salammô*, *Sigurd*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, etc. He always had tears in his eyes when singing *Faust*. His favourite composers were Wagner‡ and Gounod. He adored Massenet. "One day in Chamonix with his Spanish teacher (whom he had met during the war), he abruptly left the table when the orchestra played some Massenet, because the teacher had said that it was music fit only for concierges."

* Charles-Alexandre Fighiera, *Catalogue-Promenade of the Musée Masséna*, 1987.

† Inscriptions by Raymond Roussel on books given to Reynaldo Hahn: "to the first man to have composed immortal masterpieces from his adolescence, fond recollections from his great admirer and humble performer"; "to Reynaldo Hahn the genius, the greatest living musician, from his enthusiastic old friend"; "to the most miraculous of any past, present or future musicians, this friendly token of enthusiasm".

‡ "Towards the end of his life, Wagner, whose work had at last become well known and understood, was being plagiarised by a hoard of unscrupulous copyists..." *Locus Solus*, chapter III.

Juliette, the Leiris's adopted daughter, was fourteen, and was thus allowed to remain in the salon with her parents. But Roussel was extremely prudish: he sometimes asked them to send the girl away before singing some sentimental song. In a fury, she would then go off to join her younger brothers, who were not admitted to these musical evenings, all the more mortified because these fashionable ditties were songs she hummed to herself. "His hands were ravishing, his eyes velvet and his smile extremely sweet," recalled Juliette Jannet, time having done nothing to blur her memories. When he played, he became highly enraptured, forgetting the time and playing until ten in the evening, to the despair of the Leiris's cook. But he refused all invitations to dinner.

Roussel was extremely proud of his performances. One day, he sang *Manon* so passionately that it brought tears to the young girl's eyes. And, when his mother asked him if he had spent a pleasant evening with the Leiris family, he replied: "Yes, I sang so well that it made Mademoiselle Juliette cry." Eugène Leiris made several recordings on wax cylinders of these musical evenings, in particular of Wieniavsky's *L'Étincelle* and Louis Diémer's *Le Nautonier*; these recordings have unfortunately disappeared after being used as toys by the children of Michel Leiris's elder brother. One cannot resist thinking that Roussel must also have played pieces such as *The Bluebell of Scotland* and the jig *Sir Roger de Coverley*, which are both referred to in *Locus Solus*.

Roussel's nephew, Michel Ney, could also remember some later evenings: "He had a very pleasant voice, rather like Reynaldo Hahn's... He sang the songs of the day while accompanying himself on the piano... I loved operettas when I was a kid... So we rented the score... and he would play and sing it that evening."

It is also known that, in his youth, Roussel composed some melodies, but these have not been recovered. He seems to have kept only the "slow plaintive melody... full of strong nostalgic charm" (*Andante con grande espressione*) which Félicie sings to the tarot, and which is reproduced in *Locus Solus*.

Jean Ferry has emphasised that "music played a huge part in the writings of Roussel, a musician himself. After the theatre, it was this author's main pre-occupation. His heroes, when they are not inventors, are nearly all actors or musicians (or all three at the same time). Everything, in Roussel's world, plays. The cats, the insects, an amputated tibia, tarot cards, metal as its volume changes, the fur of an animal; a worm plays a cithara; Romulus the horse sings; Egroïzard engraves voices; Handel composes the oratorio *Vesper* on a banister rail; the Indian twins sing; the hair of the submerged dancer also makes music."*

A GIFT FOR IMITATION

Yet Roussel also gave readings — or at least he did at the Leiris's house, according

* Jean Ferry, *Documents* 34, 9.

to their daughter, Juliette Jannet. He gave “perfect renditions” of novels by Pierre Loti (*Le Mariage de Loti*, *Mon Frère Yves*, *Le Roman d’un spahi*, *Pêcheur d’Islande*), or *Uranie* by Camille Flammarion.

Raymond Roussel was not exaggerating when he wrote in *How I Wrote...*: “The only time when I truly experienced success was when I sang, accompanying myself on the piano, and in particular in the numerous impersonations that I made of actors or other people. There, at least, I was a huge and universal success.” Roussel, who took a child’s opinion of a highly elaborate work as seriously as he did that of a critic, was thus condemned to the derisory “success” of an imitator.

Robert de Montesquiou did not appreciate these imitations, even though they were part and parcel of high-society gatherings. In his novel *La Trépidation* (1922) we find: “Everyone knows what this exercise consists in: imitating a person by reproducing more or less closely, with hyperbole or hypertrophy, his vocal inflexions, facial expressions, gestures and nervous tics. Those who excel in this inferior display puff it up or play it down by pronouncing certain sentences that are more or less similar to those which such-and-such a topic of conversation would inspire in the person being aped; let that be the final word on this form of art.”

In *Les Délices de Capharnaüm* (1921), Robert de Montesquiou went even further. Under the title “The Multiple Double”, he devoted an entire chapter to this fashion for impersonations, “twenty-five years ago” (i.e. in about 1895-1900), and, above all, to Raymond Roussel’s imitations:

I went to see this artist, who was known to me because I had read his strange, rather than attractive, books, unless it be that form of attraction which curiosity and mystery inevitably exercise upon a mind such as mine: I had been there scarcely a few seconds, in the throes of that embarrassment, or at least that ceremonial carry-on occasioned by a first visit, or shall we say first version, when my host stood up in front of me, as though powered by a spring, his expression altered and, as if replying to an inner voice that had whispered to him: “This *stranger* does not wish to waste his time...”, he said to me distinctly: “I’ll give you a few impersonations.”

At that, he removed a densely written notepad from his pocket, started flicking through it and said: “Whom would you like to hear first? [Alexandre] Gabriac, Reynaldo [Hahn], Jacques Blanche, or Madame [Madeleine] Lemaire?” — and before I had had a moment to pronounce any refusal or preference, my thoughts being thrown about between horror and desire, I saw before me the slightly prominent jaw of my friend Alexandre, busy pronouncing society oracles with its usual sagacity. Hardly had I recovered, when the author of *La Fête chez Thérèse* suddenly stood before me, transcending and condescending, deigning to address to me alone his opinion of Lili Lehman; and yet one could have said, as in the *Valkyrie*: “Nobody had come in, but someone had arrived.” With no objection, the composer then vanished; my delightful torturer’s left eye then moved over towards its fellow and Jacques Blanche was now present, speaking in a bitter-sweet tone and blaming an invisible duke for preferring a neutral style to a neutered style.

I couldn’t stand any more; you will understand why; I put an end to the performance just when that well-known watercolourist, who is dear to me, was about to appear and teach me, as skilfully as she does in reality, the secret of eternal roses; I moved away, having informed my host that there was still enough daylight for him to attempt a few representations of “timid

me" in front of his triptych mirror.

"Since then, I haven't stopped thinking about it," says a line of Victor Hugo's; and that is equally true for me, I cannot stop thinking about my visit to Proteus; I wonder how that unbelievable Amphitryon will finish up if he is capable, every day, of repeating our contemporaries' tics, starts, convulsions and even their hemiplegia for hours on end, in front of a three-panelled mirror in order to multiply them through his gestures and his mask. Does not such an actor have the right to apply the following lines to himself, which I wrote for the actor in my book of *Prières*:

*You alone, Lord, can recognise my soul
In all the borrowed bodies I have made mine.*

In such a manner, Roussel imitated the plump Paul Fugère of the Opéra-Comique, or the spindly Morton (who played a judge in the stage adaptation of *Locus Solus*), or Max Dearly, Lucien Guitry, de Max, etc. "Ah! he was very funny, because he imitated them perfectly," said Michel Ney. This was not the opinion of a journalist in 1922:

This shy man who, during the rehearsals [of *Locus Solus*], remained for hours without opening his mouth, suddenly leapt on to the stage and said:

"I'm going to give you an impersonation of Lucien Guitry."

And, when he had finished his ghastly performance, he asked the astonished cast:

"That's him to a "T", isn't it?... Now for a little impersonation of de Max."

And when Frondaie asked him sarcastically:

"Is it de Max with a sore throat?"

Roussel looked at him for a moment and replied, quite simply, without any trace of irony:

"But he always has a sore throat."

According to Charlotte Dufrène, "he worked for seven years on each of his imitations, repeating the sentences aloud to perfect the intonation, copying the gestures, until the resemblance was perfect". He sometimes played this parlour game for his nephew, Michel Ney, who was too young to remember the names of the "friends" or "other people" he imitated. Michel Leiris was told by Charlotte Dufrène that "though I never saw him do it, he could imitate [his] father brilliantly". What we can suppose from reading Montesquiou is that certain people did not always appreciate the joke, being "amongst those who suspect that once they are gone, they will be mimicked in turn". Raymond Roussel kept an updated "list of [his] friends whose tics [he reproduced] in front of [his] triptych mirror. [...] He carried in his grey jacket-pocket a list of people who were condemned to seeing their mannerisms reproduced so faithfully that they could not really be offended."*

Three typewritten sheets of one of these "lists" have been discovered, consisting of short sentences of two to four lines, spoken by well-known actors and referring to certain typical parts of their repertoires: Lucien Guitry ("And for the first time, he suspected the aunt of being the mother..."), Fugère, Marcel Simon, de Max ("It's

* *La Trépidation*.

a tomb topped with an iron cross, and iron crosses are rare in a paupers' cemetery, so you'll find the tomb I mean in no time"), Georges Beer, Galipaux, de Féraudy, Albert Lambert, Max Dearly ("An imbecile... An imbecile, you say...? But you can't know if he's an imbecile. Just look at the mutton-shops, I used to love mutton-shops, and now I can't stomach them") and, for the ladies, Sarah Bernhardt, Thérèse Kolb, Augustine Leriche, Cécile Sorel, and so on.*

Raymond Roussel was thinking of himself when he described Bob Bucharessas'† imitations thus: "With unheard-of control and a talent of miraculous precocity, the charming child started a series of imitations, accompanied by eloquent gestures: various sounds of a train starting to move, the calls of all sorts of domestic pets, the grinding of a saw against a whetstone, the sudden popping of a champagne cork, the glugging of liquid being poured out, a fanfare on a hunting-horn, a violin solo or the plaintive song of a cello, all formed an astonishing repertoire which, to whoever closed his eyes, gave a complete illusion of reality."

This is one of Raymond Roussel's paradoxes: a private man, who refused to write about his own impressions in order to keep his imagination pure, nevertheless went about observing his friends, the gestures and voices of actors, and other sounds, to extract from them his party imitations. The fact that the same man wrote those masterpieces we so admire, and also indulged in such infantile amusements, which he believed gave him some glory, would be quite unbearable were it not clear that his writings originated in the mind of a child who had been marked by the star of genius. He himself said it: the art of imitation connects with the imagination, since both consist in using artificial means to create "a complete illusion of reality". This is what Roussel was looking for in the years following his national service: how to create the illusion of reality through minute descriptions of photographs and pictures (thus unreal, and being part of the imagination). I could also add, how to give metrical rhymed verse the appearance of prose.

LA VUE, LE CONCERT AND LA SOURCE

The descriptions in *La Doublure* were of real festivities, engraved in Roussel's memory and seen afresh each year. But memory and observation are not sufficient for creating an illusion of reality. As a landscape painter copies postcards or photographs, so Roussel moved away from ungraspable reality; he limited his line of sight to the scene already framed by a photographer or engraver.

He was twenty-six when *La Vue* was published. "This poem was published in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* and was remarked upon by certain men of letters." It would have been hard for them to miss it, for *La Vue*, "an unpublished poem by M. Raymond Roussel", covered five front-page columns of *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* of 18-19 April

* This list can only be a draft since the name Canterel, as spoken by Galipaux, is spelt "Cauterel" and has not been corrected.

† Or "bouche à ressassé" [resitting mouth]. The procedure is here at work in the name of this character in *Impressions of Africa*.

* (p. 79) Georges Jeannot (1848-1934) had already illustrated Victor Hugo and various fashionable authors: Alphonse Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt, Léon Hennique, Abel Hermant, René Maizeroy, Guy de Maupassant, Octave Mirbeau, André Theuriet, Gustave Toudouze and Émile Zola; this must explain why Roussel chose him.

† (p. 79) Roussel seems to have been mistaken: the first night of this *opera buffe* in three acts by Robert de Flers and Gaston de Caillavet, with music by Claude Terrasse, was at the Théâtre des Variétés on 15 April 1903, that is to say, three days before *La Vue* was published; its libretto contains no reference to the business mentioned by Roussel. A more likely candidate is *Monsieur de La Palisse*, by the same authors, with the same cast, première at the Variétés on 9 November 1904 and which Roussel, in an inscription to Robert de Flers, claims he saw five times!

1903. In the middle, occupying three columns, was a large illustration by Georges Jeanniot (the people seen on a yacht); three other drawings by Jeanniot also illustrated the poem.*

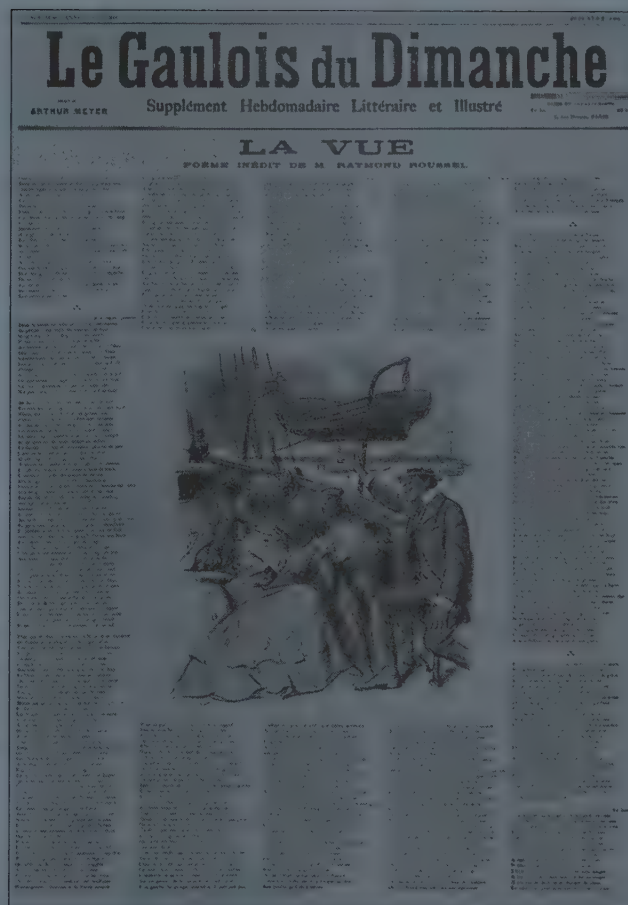
Roussel seems to have been sure of the success of *La Vue*: "an allusion was even made to it in *Sire de Vergy*, an operetta then being staged at the Variétés. One of the characters, I do not remember which, sees in a penholder, which Ève La Vallière brought him, a view representing the Battle of Tolbiac".†

Robert de Montesquiou wrote some fine comments about *La Vue*:

I should like, some day, to evaluate the poem *La Vue*, which seems to me to be totally empty of poetry, but which I consider to be one of the most singular concepts ever to emerge from a human brainbox, and at the same time one of the most astonishing productions of someone who creates items such as a chariot that may be hidden under a fly's wing.‡

What we have here, according to Montesquiou, are "precision instruments in the form of alexandrines [...]. As regards our literary turner's prosody or metrics, it reads something like good Coppée; not the terrible Coppée of his so-called dramatic works, no, rather, that which I would term marketable Coppée [...]. The author of *La Vue* [...] seems to me to be as impassive as a Chinaman sculpting an ivory ball."§ And Montesquiou reminds us that, several years later, when he knew Roussel, he gave him a study of *L'Inextricable Graveur: Rodolphe Bresdin* (1908): "How, indeed, could a 'divisionist' of his calibre and quality fail to be won over by the drawings of a man who picked out each twig on a tree, the fibrillae on the leaves and the spots on a dragonfly, just as the Creator counts the feathers of a sparrow and the grains of pollen?" Regarding "such an infusorial art, but, I must add, the infusoria of a genius," Robert de Montesquiou finally thanked Roussel for "writing two hundred lines on voiceless visions, thus putting up the price of silence". Quite an achievement for a musician!

But why does Montesquiou make no reference to one of his own poems, published in 1895 in his collection *Le Parcours du rêve au souvenir*, in which he mocks the vain struggle of a lady "painter" before a Swiss landscape?



* (See opposite page.)

† (See opposite page.)

‡ *Les Pas effacés*, 1923, vol III, p. 78.

§ *Élus et Appelés: "Un auteur difficile"*, 1921.

The English lady has a quarrel
With the pointed mountain;
And her box of watercolours
Struggles to depict it.

Her hardy brush perches itself
Where goats dare not graze;
And there, with parrot green,
She paints the Alpine arolla.

On a lake of Prussian blue
She fiddles and fusses,
Then, with the brush she is sucking,
She places her gouache on the peak.

And all this anvil labour
To depict that one-eyed scene,
When, closing a lid we squint
Into the hole of a penholder.

How very discreet and modest of Montesquiou. He understood perfectly well that he could no longer make fun of the decoration on a penholder, once he had glimpsed in it the terrible silence of that “infusoria of genius”. With *La Vue*, which gave its title to a collection of three poems, we enter into a world that is different from ours, a Rousselian world far distant from reality. There are no sounds, neither are there colours.

Up until now, we have known where we are. The action in *La Doublure*, from 1897, occurred in well-known places, in Paris, Nice and Neuilly; that of *Chiquenaude* in 1900 is already not clearly localised any more, and we do not know in which theatre *Le Forban talon rouge* was performed. It is left to us to make suppositions. The place photographed in *La Vue* is not identified, but we cannot help but think that Roussel must have been describing what he could see from a window in Biarritz (or else Dieppe?) overlooking the sea. At the top of the beach, there are some planks of wood:

... a long walkway of wooden planks
Parallel to the shoreline, some way back,
Makes strolling easy...

Another natural curiosity on that seaboard is the pierced Rock:

... At the end of the beach a rock
Sticks out into the sea to form a point [...]
On the big rock a track has been cut out
For walkers; it is harsh and rocky ground,
Rising and falling as it twists around;
By art, they have left a natural arcade

In the middle; all told, a promenade,
A nice place to stroll out to...

This rock would be quite ordinary if we did not know that the Roussels spent the end of the summer in Biarritz. The mountains are close by, as is indicated on the map in the “fat guide-book” which a man is consulting while “working out a good itinerary for an amusing trip in the area”. We also know that this image summoned up memories:

... and my thought
Wanders dreamily, unwillingly brought
Towards the past; now comes the sensation
Of all I felt through a summer season
Which, looking at the view so powerfully,
Brings, with a swift rush of intensity,
Its latent memories of summer days
Now dead, fast blown into a distant haze.

This is a world of silence. A world described in fantastic detail, but which remains frozen, where places have no names, and where men, women and children are also anonymous. The photograph in *La Vue* is black and white; nothing reveals the lighter or darker shades of the unspecified colours. Even the author, when tempted, is reduced to making suppositions:

It is light, fleecy hair, blond no doubt...

To illustrate *Le Concert* in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* of 27-28 June 1903, Madeleine Lemaire succeeded in depicting the scene Roussel described from a letterhead illustration.* Once again, it is a memory:

Midnight chimes far off; alone by my light,
Leaving the present, I turn back my sight
To old memories of good times now gone.

The drawing on this writing-paper is printed in sky-blue. The third poem in the collection, *La Source* (the source in a spa town), was not published in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* but only in the volume as it appeared in 1904. After the blackness of the photograph in *La Vue* and the blue letterhead of *Le Concert*, we now have the “gentle pink” paper label on a “tall bottle / Of fashionable mineral water”. This time, however, memories do not play a part. The scene takes place in the present: the narrator, in a restaurant where “all is calm”, describes the label on the bottle in front of him and which the waiter removes at the end of the poem, at the same time whisking away our own vision. The calmness of the restaurant turns out to be less

* This is also proof that Roussel managed to express the aesthetic taste of his period.

favourable to meditative observation than the window before which the narrator of *La Vue* is standing, or the desk of *Le Concert*. All we have left is the world of silence.

The narrator poet of *La Source* is no longer the relaxed observer of the preceding poems: little by little, Raymond Roussel stops respecting the rules he seems to have given himself. While the characters in *La Vue* were mere objects, those in *Le Concert* are already allowed some feelings of their own; consequently, the characters of the people in *La Source* are variously developed and the poet observer takes an active part. He turns to satire. This evident progression, from the objective to the psychological, would seem to prove that the three poems were written chronologically in the order in which they were published. Roussel even confirmed the fact: "After *La Vue*, I wrote *Le Concert* and *La Source*..."

Readers of *La Doublure* were perhaps astonished at the versification of a prose narrative; this time they would have to acknowledge that the author had succeeded in bending prosody to fit the description of images. In these three long poems Roussel used a "procedure" that was certainly not new, but which seems rather surprising given the precision of the descriptions. This procedure is quite simply rhyme. He listed the rhymes down one side of the page, then filled up the blank space with ink, having first jotted down in pencil the overall meaning. In the drafts of *La Vue*, he seems to have been guided more by the rhyme than by meaning. All three poems are *bouts-rimés*; Roussel sometimes changed a word in a line, but never the rhyme itself.

The publication date of *La Vue*, which was issued by Lemerre in his *Poètes contemporains* series at 3.50 FF, was 31 December 1903. The bill for 550 copies was 1015 francs (there were no copies on Japanese vellum); Lemerre was also paid for an advertisement in *La Revue des Deux-Mondes* (70 francs). Raymond Roussel sent out copies on 10 and 11 February 1904:

to monsieur Eugène Leiris
as a token of my deep gratitude and unchanging affection.
11 February 1904

Raymond Roussel

"I cannot claim that Roussel liked me," Michel Leiris said. "He received me because I was the son of a man who meant much to him."

Lemerre did not copyright *La Vue* until 18 May. It was a complete failure. Eugène Leiris went round the few bookshops that agreed to stock it buying up copies which he then gave away to his friends, so as to make Roussel believe people were buying his book. In fact, it took fifty years for the print run to sell out, in 1953.

While Raymond Roussel was rolling back the frontiers of silence, his mother had

acquired in 1903 a double freehold concession in the old cemetery of Neuilly, and had had built there one of the most imposing monuments to be seen. Vault number 2, series 206 of the 7th division, is a chapel nearly five metres long, with no windows, and sealed with a green, bronze door. The only decoration is the following inscription on the façade: “Famille Roussel”. It was there that Marguerite Roussel would bring together in secret her loved ones: in 1904 she had the bodies of her parents, the Moreau-Chaslons, her husband, Eugène Roussel, and her son, Georges, moved there. And there it was that she would join them, hidden from view, with an ostentation that overwhelms the neighbouring graves.

The chopped-up alexandrines which made *La Vue* so original gradually disappear from *Le Concert* and *La Source*. In the latter, the lines are rhythmical, caesuras occur and, if there is some padding, this often takes up entire lines... The writing has turned into classical prosody, something that neither *La Doublure* nor *La Vue* could be accused of! Raymond Roussel was in danger of becoming a fluent writer.

L’Inconsolable appeared in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* of 10-11 September 1904, with no illustrations; exceptionally, these “unpublished verses by M. Raymond Roussel” are dated: “18 July-27 August 1904”. As he himself would point out ten years later, Roussel was at that time staying with his mother in the country, in Saint Moritz, along with Robert de Montesquiou. Then, in the edition of 26-27 September, came *Têtes de carton du Carnaval de Nice*, with no illustrations, featuring a poem entitled *La Meule* and dedicated “to Verax”, a pseudonym which may conceal an inventor or lover of puzzles, unless it is Georges Dutailly, of the newspaper *L’Éclair*, who used it on occasion. So, had Roussel totally given up writing poetry? *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton* contains a long poem. But is that it? We know that, at the end of *Locus Solus*, the cockerel Mopsus writes eight alexandrines, whose “last two lines [...] finished a mysterious acrostic, commenting on Chrysomallo’s parable in strangely obscure depth... We all read it several times along with Faustine, who stood there stiffly in a dream”. What are these eight lines of verse? All he gives us is the acrostic FAUSTINE, the first letter of each of these eight lines. Why didn’t Roussel write them out? He was technically capable. Is this perhaps an invitation to reconstruct them ourselves?

MARCEL PROUST, THE TRIP TO EGYPT

When Roussel started writing rhymed verse again, between ten and twenty-five years later, it was because he had discovered a new approach, a novel procedure which would allow him to break the rules of classical prosody, while at the same time seeming to obey them.

During this period spent prospecting, relations between the Roussel family and

Marcel Proust were rather sporadic, but they certainly existed. In a letter to his mother, dated 17 September 1904, Marcel Proust talks about a present they have to give Albuféra, whose wedding was imminent. But what if it should be postponed? "It could happen that the Duchesse d'Elchingen (little Roussel) dies, in which case it will probably be postponed. But she could also recover, as people think she will."* In fact Germaine, eight months pregnant and quite recovered, was able to attend her sister-in-law's wedding along with Marcel Proust. Later, in 1906, Proust sent Roussel a copy of his translation of Ruskin, *Sésame et les Lys*, with an inscription that proves they had never been on intimate terms: "To Monsieur Raymond Roussel, pleasant recollections."†

On 30 May 1905, Raymond Roussel, who was still living on Rue de Chaillot, received the order to go on the morning of 28 August to the 1st Regiment of Military Engineers, at the Petites-Écuries barracks in Versailles, for a period of training until 23 September. He did not go back to Amiens, where Jules Verne had just died on 24 March, but we can be sure that his death deeply moved him. On 31 October 1905, his sister Germaine gave birth to a second son, Michel Ney, who was baptised at Saint-Pierre de Chaillot on 3 May 1906. He was to be the only heir of Raymond Roussel. He owned the copyrights of his uncle's books, and later sold them on to Jean-Jacques Pauvert, thus preventing them from being dispersed.

Raymond Roussel travelled many times with his mother, but he also travelled alone. 1906 stands as an example of this. After the usual winter stay in Monte Carlo and on the Côte d'Azur, on 10 April he left for Spain: he was in Madrid on the 11th and in Seville on the 12th. In July, Mme Roussel took the waters at Mont-Dore, where Raymond joined her on 7 August; on the 12th, they went on an excursion to Saint-Nectaire, and on the 14th, Mme Roussel noted in her diary: "Accident, car broke down." They were, of course, in Biarritz on 11 September (they attended the bull races in Bayonne on the 22nd); then, on 28 October, Raymond Roussel left his mother on a one-month journey that would take him to Italy and Egypt.

* *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, vol. IV, edited, introduced and annotated by Philip Kolb, Plon, 1978. In a note, the editor wonders if "Proust may have had in mind this Duchesse d'Elchingen, née Roussel, when writing about his young Marquise de Cambremer, née Legrandin?"

† Catalogue of the Marcel Proust exhibition, entry 203f, Musée Jacquemart-André, 1971.

‡ Michel Leiris, *Le Voyageur et son ombre*.

§ Inscription on a copy of *Locus Solus*: "to Doctor Mattin, in whose charming company I travelled the globe, best wishes". Twenty years later, Roussel sent him a "signed letter in answer to a greetings card in January 1933" (B.N., Manuscript Department).

Well before the steamer had reached a latitude sufficiently low that the Southern Cross could be seen, he fussed about its appearance, questioning the crew daily and seeming far more preoccupied by that constellation than by all the other natural and ethnic curiosities that he was going to see. ‡

Le Bourgeois et Compagnie, a travel agency for "Grand Excursions", confirmed that they had organised a trip to Egypt and Upper Egypt for two people travelling first-class with a valet, for 22,000 francs. As a precaution, his mother sent along a certain Dr Mattin§ with Roussel. After a stay in Rome (the Grand Hotel), the travellers arrived in Naples (Bertolini Hotel) on 13 November, which gave them the chance to visit Pompeii. They took ship on the *Hohenzollern* and landed at Alexandria on 16 November. On the 22nd, they went up the Nile as far as the first cataract, then went

back down as far as Cairo. More than anything else, it is Raymond Roussel's travels that have caused the largest amount of nonsense to be written about him; this derives from the ravings of Roger Vitrac, and even more so from those of André Guillot, the scullion who saw nothing of Raymond Roussel but his feet! It must be admitted that we have difficulty imagining how he paid for such luxurious pleasure trips without any professional justification — at the time, only civil servants, the diplomatic corps, sailors and colonial soldiers, accompanied by their families, would normally have been able to undertake such journeys. If we include the constant trips Roussel and his mother made to England, Switzerland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Tunisia and around France, in resorts of the sort their rank in Parisian society demanded, then we have to admit that Raymond Roussel, who is known for being a great traveller but also for being sedentary, in fact had itchy feet.

He was talked into this first trip to Egypt by his mother. He was nearly thirty, and it was time for him to see the world. Thus it was an “educational” trip to the land of the Pharaohs and, for the first and certainly the last time, Roussel endeavoured to make the most of it by keeping a diary. From a letter to Michel Leiris in April 1927, thanking him for a postcard of the Sphinx of Giza, we know that Roussel had already visited Egypt. What is more, while the Africa of *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) remains vague, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1932) refers to real places: Damietta and its surroundings, the Pyramids, and Rosetta. And yet, we can see no relationship between the diary Roussel kept in 1906 and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.

What use did Roussel intend to make of that notebook in which he jotted down not so much his impressions, but things he had seen? As he had already written long descriptive poems and prose texts, did he now want to try his hand at travel writing? Did he think that, like Pierre Loti, he would be capable of working exoticism into a novel? Whatever the truth, he soon gave up, if we believe what he said in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*:

There is a further curious fact that I must mention. I have travelled a great deal [... yet] from all these travels I never took anything for my books. It seems to me that this is worth mentioning, since it clearly shows that for me imagination is everything.”

And, concerning *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*:

Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique was to have included a descriptive part. It consisted of a miniature pair of opera-glasses, each tube of which, just two millimetres in diameter and designed to be pressed against the eye, contained a photograph on glass, one showing the bazaars of Cairo, the other the quay at Luxor.

I wrote the description of these two photographs in verse. (It was, in fact, a precise recommencing of my poem *La Vue*.)

Is he quite reliable about this? What became of those opera-glasses? We have only one "Egyptian notebook" of unfinished poems. The first of these is a description of the bazaar, but of the one at Minya (the second stop-off during his navigation of the Nile), which continues with another poem (a photograph of the streets of a French town in "minuscule opera-glasses"), in turn interrupted by an episode of *Les Noces*, and reused under the heading "opera-glasses" in the descriptive poem!

An extract from the notebook, dated 24 November:

Visited Minya [?] — Walked in the bazaar — Dyer with completely blue hands — Copper shapes for ironing fezzes — Wooden dummy on a tailor's balcony — Post office — Station — Music escorting a wedding — A sheikh on horseback — Little girls 3 glass bracelets blue yellow and red — X a child beaten by its father for running away from school — Stopped in a café — Little boot-polishers — Little girl collecting camel droppings in a basket on her head — Camels laden with sacks of cotton — Rebazaar [*sic*] — Jewellers safes — X — Makers of plaits — The beaten child again — Comforted by its mother — 12-year-old tinsmith everyone wants to photograph he cries / / / baksheesh and he lets us — Funny little child of 6 — Children leaving school making a military salute — Many escorted us to the ship — One limps.

[In the margin] water-skins made from a whole donkey-hide / women with bracelets on their ankles.

Sunset on board pearl grey tints.

On the 26th, the "boat" (no doubt a "steamer", like the one imitated by a blind man met on the 30th at Dendera, rather than an uncomfortable felucca) was at Asyut, on the 28th at Abydos, on the 29th at Nag Hammadi, on the 30th at Dendera, and from 1 to 4 December at Luxor and Karnak. On 2 December, Roussel crossed the Nile on a felucca to visit the Valley of the Kings; on the 3rd it was the turn of the Valley of the Queens and the two colossi of Memnon. On the 5th the travellers were at Esna, on the 6th Edfu, the 7th at Aswan, and on the 8th they visited the temple of Philae and the first cataract. They went back down the Nile on the current in less than a week. Roussel stayed for a few more days in Cairo, until 21 December. Finally, his mother noted his joining her again on 27 December 1906, after landing at Naples.

During this trip (perhaps less solitary than one might think since he mentions, for example, taking tea on 4 December with some Swiss who had travelled with him on the *Hohenzollern*), Raymond Roussel obediently did what tourists still do when they visit Egypt: crawling into tombs and the Pyramids (his candle blew out!), marvelling at the freshness of the paintings in tombs and temples, going for rides on a camel and a donkey, buying "souvenirs" (scarabs, copper knick-knacks) and of course taking (or having taken?) photographs: on 29 November, a woman on a donkey; on 7 December, a child carrying a kid; on the 11th, some naked children — there are so many that we cannot help wondering if the letter "X" in the grey notebook does not stand for a photograph being taken.

What must also have interested him was of course the blind mimic (animal cries, the steamer), the strolling conjurer “with small rabbit 9 goblets corks”, the *cafés chantants* and the puppet theatres in Cairo.

It is all the more disconcerting to read these four lines from the last canto of *New Impressions of Africa*:

Skimming the Nile, I see two banks shoot by
Full of flowers, wings, glints, rich greenery,
Any of which would fill twenty salons
[((((((...)))))]
With rays and fruit, with dark shadowy leaves.

This is all Roussel “retained” of his trip to Egypt, or of the notebook of jottings taken from life or the poems.

SOLITARY WORK ON THE PROCEDURE

“Finally, at about the age of thirty, I felt that I had found my way thanks to the combinations of words I have already mentioned. I wrote *Nanon*, *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton*, then *Impressions d’Afrique*.”

These *Textes de grande jeunesse ou Textes-Genèse* are (along with, to a lesser degree, the *Chroniquettes*) the only texts by Roussel in which the compositional procedure is apparent to the reader, since the rule (or we might say, “the rules of the game”) consists in writing a story that links together two homophonic sentences, with different meanings, placed at the beginning and the end. Studying the manuscripts of these “tales of a few pages” shows that the early drafts did not come easily, and that the characters generally lacked names, which were presumably chosen by the use of other procedures. The *image d’Épinal* was judged by Roussel as needing “to be entirely redone as a *tableau vivant* or waxwork as in the Musée Grévin”, and became the *Légende bretonne*, using the same homophonies. But other attempts yielded nothing: three times over he wrote variants of a tale playing on “*le rayon du trou de la pièce d’or du tapis/tamis vert*” [“the ray from the hole in the gold coin of the green cloth/sieve”], on “*carillon/carpillon*” [“bell chimes/a small carp”] or on the “*trou du mauvais col*” [“hole in the bad collar”] of the “*grosse bille rouge*” [“big red billiard ball”]. Only *Méphisto*, which became *Chiquenaude*, seems to have satisfied him, since this he had published by Lemerre. The other tales were published in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*: *Nanon* on 14-15 September 1907, unillustrated (its *Texte-Genèse* is called *Les Anneaux du Gros Serpent à Sonnettes*); *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton* (*Texte-Genèse: Les Taches de la laine*) on 6-7 June 1908, this time accompanied by a title illustration and sixteen *culs-de-lampe* by Jean

Jamet. But what a catastrophe! In the last line of the story, instead of “*bouton à cinq pattes*” [“button with five strands”], the typesetter put, as at the beginning, “*mouton à cinq pattes*” [“sheep with five legs”]! It is easy to imagine Roussel’s panic: the tale was now “meaningless”.

When he reached the age of thirty, Raymond Roussel began to feel surer of himself. On 30 January 1907, he was included on the list of winners of *palmes académiques*, the first of the “honours” he would pursue for the rest of his life. That same year, he also appeared in the first edition of France’s “Who’s Who”, the *Bottin mondain*. It seems that now he had found “his way” he no longer feared failure. It may be reckoned that Roussel’s working methods did not much change during his life, and that they were practically the same when he was thirty as they were fifteen years later. Dr Pierre Janet returned several times to his patient’s solitude:

When Martial had his phobia of being denigrated, that terror of hearing any criticism being made in front of him, the fear of having to defend a friend or musician he loved, the fear of having to defend one of his opinions or having to alter it suppressed all his social relationships, and that distinct period in his ordinary psychasthenic state was singularly close to melancholia.

I have reminded the reader of Martial’s way of life, how he lived withdrawn and alone, without friends, with no relationships, following meticulous rules, with no futile distractions, uninterested in anything outside his regular work and fundamentally afraid of any supplementary action: “If one has friends, one is exposed to having to send them cards of congratulation or condolence.” It is evident that this behaviour must be termed ascetic...

This forty-five-year-old man has an extremely ordered existence, he lives alone, utterly withdrawn, utterly isolated, in a way that seems very sad, but which is sufficient to fill him with joy for he works almost constantly. He works in a regular manner, for a set number of hours every day, without allowing himself any exception, with a great effort and often with great fatigue, elaborating long literary works: “I bleed,” he says, “over every sentence.”

Michel Leiris noted:

According to Mme Dufrène, Roussel wrote in the morning, on average for three hours, beginning at a specific time and finishing at a specific time, like an office clerk. But what was accomplished during these sessions was extremely irregular and, in the course of these three hours, Roussel sometimes found only the name of a character. On other occasions, he worked by electric light, with the blinds down. When he felt in form, he worked overtime so as to get ahead and be able to give himself a break, if necessary.*

And in 1922 Roussel explained:

“... I have been working on a book for five years.”

“Do you work a lot?”

“Every day... five to six lines in two hours.”

“And will you have finished soon?”

“Oh no! I shall need another seven or eight years, and with the rehearsals of *Locus Solus* taking up so much of my time, I have been obliged to work nights.”†

* *Journal*, 1961.

† Sourceless press cutting, dated 31 December 1922. Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Rondel archive.

"I work without any reference material. To write, it is necessary for me to wipe the slate clean. Blank paper, that is all."*

And yet, as Dr Janet pointed out, he "leads a more or less communal existence, appearing for a moment at mealtimes, then locking himself in his bedroom, sitting beside his table, but he writes, he works, he composes countless lines of verse."

"If he was a genius, as it is claimed, he had great patience, for cannot great patience become genius?" remarks Sergio Solmi. †

Roussel, to quote Dr Janet once more, "has an extremely interesting conception of literary beauty, the work must contain nothing real, no observations of the world or of minds, just totally imaginary combinations: these are already ideas of an extra-human world".

These combinations are combinations of words. In the end, it would seem that all of Raymond Roussel's work on his "procedure" (having, in *La Doublure* and *La Vue*, ruthlessly eradicated "poetic" images) consisted in providing a new story which distracts the reader's attention from a literary mechanism that he judged too blatant. Roussel, who was shy and prudish, was especially afraid of voyeurs. He had his secret, and one day he would divulge it, but in the mean time, he wanted his books to be read and admired without that critical question: how do they work? Without meaning to, he had joined that group of great iconoclasts of classical rhetoric — Lautréamont getting round the nature of his "poetic" role by using a collage technique which was previously called plagiarism, or Jarry blowing apart the sentence ("the cross-roads of every word"‡).

Yet this did not stop some readers — Jean Ferry, Élie Richard, Robert de Montesquiou, Roger Vitrac and Willy — from almost discovering the secret. Jean Ferry was the first to notice that, by practically always using words with at least two meanings, Roussel's vocabulary was irresistibly reminiscent not of the Symbolist poets' search for rare terms, but of passionate "lovers of crossword puzzles, who also talk in *hies, rus, volateurs, lés, duites, sétons* and *sistres*".§

In any case, such vocabulary presupposes unusual usage of the dictionary. To Roussel's mind, every word was a rebus that had to be unlocked and, from one definition to another, and from homonyms to puns, he sought out unexpected meanings that would open the floodgates of narration. Here, symbolism meets children's games, an area that lies beyond some people's abilities. For example, in *The Concert*, the naïve coachman ("he's so pure he is unintelligent") takes everything at face value:

Words for him are not cunning rebuses
With hidden meanings to be discovered.

On the other hand, in *The Source* (also 1903), there appears a young lady who

* Elie Richard, *Paris-Soir*, 1927.

† Sergio Solmi, *La Salute di Montaigne*.

‡ "Raymond Roussel's logic and imagination occasionally produce delectable pages reminiscent of *Les Chants de Maldoror* or Alfred Jarry's *Docteur Faustroll*, 'pataphysicien.'" Letter from Régis Gignoux, dated 22 January 1927, communicated by Michel Lados.

§ Obscure French words found only in crossword puzzles. [Trans.]

enjoys crudity and sauciness:

She practises when she can; with her quick
And rich imagination she can pick
Double meanings, obscure, inelegant,
And what is more highly extravagant,
From the simplest and plainest of discourse,
Thus laughingly making it rude and coarse.
Of puns she has amassed whole treasures
Esteemed by assistants in draperies.

Fashionable society, which applauded the Petomane at the Moulin Rouge, was keen on the saucy and scatological humour of *cafés chantants*. Like the drapers' assistants, Jules and Edmond de Goncourt enjoyed Suzanne Lagier's dirty jokes; a child called "Petit Maurice" (who would become Maurice Chevalier) sang a saucy repertoire on stage; not to mention the similar subject matter that appeared in comic songs performed by Ouvrard, Fragon, Dranem or Mayol, Yvette Guilbert,* Polaire or Mistinguett. Without resorting to citing Alphonse Allais or Léon Bloy, past masters of this game, here is Robert de Montesquiou describing a fashionable salon, at which Marcel Proust could well have been an intimate: "The assembly is elegant. Recognised: the Rajah of Smellilot, the Duchesse de Roanne, the Vicomtesse de Laristinkpot, the Baronne Hashat, Madame Meyer and Madame de Meyer, Madame Lucien Sillyass and Princesse Lucien Mureld, Mesdames Nicenose and Jaundice, Monsieur and Madame Mustehee-Moan, Monsieur and Madame Mustehee-Tipple, Madame Marcel Packet, the Consul of Shortarse, the Archimandrite Fartzabed, Madame de Omegodde, the Begum of Fyrce, Madame Bulltard, the chief Shiite Bibdoba, Monsieur Seebum and several members of the Pan-Belchovik assembly." Such jokes were typical of the period: flatulence and evanescence were the *belle époque*'s rhyming couplet.

Vulgar expressions first appear in *La Source* (with a woman who is *bassinante*, or "boring"); in *Impressions d'Afrique* it is everywhere and slang as well comes into use: "the word *colle* ["glue"] taken to mean (what it means in schoolboy slang)" [i.e. a "tricky question"], the dwarf Philipppo is a *raccourci* ["short cut"], *patience* and *quatre crans* are soldiers' slang [for "a polishing-board for buttons" and "four days' confinement to barracks"] — and how to react to the *natte à cul* ["arse tress"] and *théorie à renvois* ["burps theory"] which are keys to the procedure? In *L'Étoile au Front*, more slang occurs, such as *pclure* ["outdoor clothes"], *requinquer* ["to spruce up"], *alphonse* ["pimp"], etc. It is almost as if Roussel picked up a new expression every day. And yet it was one of the pleasures of his social set to play at being low-life characters. A good example of this is the long "unfinished poem" which features an aristocratic gent and a *demi-mondaine*,

* For reasons that remain unknown, Raymond Roussel later asked Pierre Leiris to contact her on his behalf.

† Raymond Roussel, *Œuvres* (*Mon Âme, Poèmes inachevés, La Doublure, Chroniquettes*), introduced by Annie Le Brun, S.N. Pauvert/Fayard, 1994.

Who's that ill-mixed couple in the corner? †

Roussel's last work, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, is the richest in slang: *le grinche* ["thief"], *sans un radi* ["without a bean"], *le tire-jus* ["snot-rag"], *un rifflard* ["a brolly"], *un porte-riffards* ["brolly-stand"], *dans la lampe* ["pissed"], *percher* ["to hang out"], *thomas* ["a potty"], *culotte* ["a gambling loss"], etc.

As for the crossword addict's vocabulary (though it should be noted that crosswords did not yet exist and appeared in France only in 1925), we can cite the "adolescent with a sunburnt [*aduste*] complexion" in *Locus Solus* (Littré already considered the word to be archaic) and the *terrein* (rather than the more usual *terrain*, i.e. "ground", though Littré prefers the spelling adopted by Roussel) in *L'Étoile au Front*, etc. It is clear that Roussel made use of several encyclopædic dictionaries, especially the nineteenth-century Larousse and the Bescherelle, which he sometimes took with him on his travels. "He considered the Bescherelle to be on a far higher level than the Larousse, and even told Mme Dufrène that it was rather like comparing Paquin or Callot with La Samaritaine,"* Michel Leiris reported.

Roussel did not stop at gathering his lexicological harvest from dictionaries, which constituted one source of poetic material among others — he also played with words. Puns, near puns and spoonerisms as well.† In the dedication of the copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* given to Michel Leiris, Roussel congratulates him thus:

page 18 "the tekurujou is the totem of the Elekeik tribe"
to Michel Leiris
author of the highly curious "Totem... totem of Tantalus"
with all my affection,
January 1927
Raymond Roussel

In his correspondence with Pierre Frondaie, Roussel willingly entered into the spirit of the jokes and puns the adapter had introduced into the stage version of *Locus Solus*. He clearly enjoyed japes and pranks, although worried readers sometimes ask if Raymond Roussel possessed a sense of humour. Of course he did! In the books written prior to the use of the procedure, there are already so many pieces of mischief that we must assume there are at least as many in the works generated by the procedure, which was itself based on "word games". These readers are even more dumbfounded before outlandish images such as the well-known "rails of calf lights".‡ But Roussel's humour resides precisely there, in the refusal to reject or censor the images or intrigues, no matter how bizarre, his procedure had created. It is firstly in the principles of the procedure itself, then in the systematic application of its rules, and finally in the obligation to accept without question the images and situations it throws up, that we can glimpse Roussel's sense of joy. This is a particular sort of humour, which is itself also a way to deny humour. We can understand why André Breton included Roussel in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*

* Paquin and Callot were fashionable *couturiers*, La Samaritaine a cheap department store. [Trans.]

† Regarding Robert Desnos's witty remark at the first night of *L'Étoile au Front* ("*Nous sommes la claque et vous êtes la joue*" ["we are the *claque* — hired applause, but also "slap" — and you are the cheek"]), Roussel made the following amusing remark: "by transposing the *l* and the *j* one obtains *nous sommes la claque et vous êtes jaloux* ["you are jealous"], which would have been rather appropriate."

‡ "*Rails en mou de veau*", from *Impressions d'Afrique*.

and why the Collège de 'Pataphysique adopted him, for other reasons, as one of its leading lights. As for Roussel's standing as a dandy, it was not just a matter of pride and shyness. As Trézel puts it in *The Star on the Forehead*: "Correctly impersonating imbecility requires knowledge never to be found among the young."

FUN AND GAMES

Roussel may have worked hard, but he also took time off. For shows, of course, but also for the sports he practised: real and lawn tennis, riding in the Bois de Boulogne and pistol shooting. In a collection of quotations he inserted into his books in 1927, he reproduced an extract from an article by Gabriel Boissy referring to an "*avant-première*" in which he called himself a "part-time sportsman" and "pistol-shooting champion". The fact that Roussel reproduced this article proves it was true. In an advertisement that appeared at the end of 1926, he boasted of his exploits: "Pistol-shooting champion, with no fewer than forty-five medals and, in particular, he won the 1909 Gastinne-Renette gold medal".*

The Gastinne-Renette rifle and pistol shooting-galleries were at 39, Avenue d'Antin (today Avenue Franklin-Roosevelt; "ENTRÉE SALONS DE TIR" can still be read above the door), near Rue de Chaillot. Roussel presumably also frequented the pigeon-shooting set at the Cercle des Acacias, just a short step from the property in Neuilly. Montesquiou addressed him in these terms: "You have [...] won shooting trophies", which shows that he liked to talk about them. So, in that same year of 1909, we are not surprised to come across "Balbet, shooting and fencing champion of France", in *Impressions of Africa*; and even less so to find that the only advertisement in the programme of the first stage version of *Impressions d'Afrique*, at the Théâtre Fémina on 30 September 1911, is a page given over to the "Maker of hunting and shooting weapons, A. Gobin, gunsmith, 108, Boulevard Magenta (between the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est). Gallery- and shooting-rifles. Large choice of revolvers of all types. Specialist in loaded cartridges. (Telephone 435.03)".

Roussel must also have been interested in the beginnings of aviation, especially since Alberto Santos-Dumont had a workshop in Neuilly and conducted trial flights over the drill-ground of the Bagatelle. He displayed his *Demoiselle* at the Aeronautics Show of 1908, and this would reappear in *Locus Solus* under two meanings of "*demoiselle*": a young girl and a rammer.

Around the same period, Roussel's mother contracted a sore throat and, despite already employing a general practitioner, she made the acquaintance of Dr Georges Clément, an ear, nose and throat specialist, and brother of the Opéra-Comique tenor Edmond Clément, whom she greatly admired. She insisted that Dr Clément

* In particular, see *La Liberté* of 27 January 1926, which Charles Méré corroborates in *L'Excelsior* of 4 February. This information was recycled by Vitrac in 1928 — neither the French Shooting Federation, nor the Société Gastinne-Renette, nor even the sporting association, the Cercle du Bois de Boulogne, has been able to provide further details.

come to examine her throat every day and made no bones about telephoning him if he did not make himself sufficiently available. Sometimes, she simply announced her arrival at the doctor's home, at 37, Rue de Rome, and then promptly invited herself to dinner. Marguerite Roussel needed to be constantly reassured concerning her health. Her diaries are full of the names of the fashionable resorts where she stayed according to the season (Monte Carlo in winter; in summer, Aix-les-Bains, Châtelguyon, Évian, Mont-Dore, Luchon, Plombières, Royat, Saint Moritz; the end of the season in Dieppe and Biarritz), many of which are spa towns, though we do not know exactly what course of treatment she took in these resorts.

However, in Marguerite Roussel's diaries covering the period from 1885 to 1911, it is above all Carlsbad that sticks out, where she would spend the months of July and August at the Hôtel Rigi or the Grand Hôtel Pupp. That year (1909), Mme Roussel decided to take along Dr Clément. He tried to make her understand that the summer was the only time he had free to spend with his wife and children. "In that case," Mme Roussel replied, "I shall take you all along, you, your wife and your children." Nor did she forget her lady's companion, her butler, her cook, her lady's maid, seventeen trunks and a collection of lap-dogs; Raymond went too, with his own valet. The Clément family accordingly spent three summers with Mme Roussel and her son. At Carlsbad they met Georges Clemenceau. In June 1927, Roussel sent him an inscribed copy of *La Poussière de Soleils*.*



Raymond Roussel in Carlsbad.

to Monsieur Clémenceau [sic]
to the greatest historic figure
of our time
with the compliments of a deeply respectful
friend from Carlsbad,

Raymond Roussel

He also dedicated a copy on Japanese vellum to Mme Clément, and had a photograph taken with her:

* Bibliothèque Alain Borer. Georges Clemenceau complained to Marguerite Moréno of the regime at Carlsbad: "Baths, massages, gargling with salt water..."

to Madame Georges Clément
 respectfully given in memory of our delightful holidays
 in Carlsbad, Ems and Biarritz.
 April 1925
 Raymond Roussel

At the Hôtel Pupp, not content with a suite, Mme Roussel took the entire floor of one of the hotel wings to ensure that she had peace and quiet, and insisted that her own cook prepare her meals. It was still forbidden to drive a car in Carlsbad and Mme Roussel always had two or three luxurious victorias at her disposal. One of them was set aside for Raymond, who took pleasure in giving the Clément children rides. He was kind, friendly, funny, a lover of puns, and went out of his way to entertain the two boys. He spoke to them very seriously about his books. He got the elder, Philippe, to learn off by heart long passages of *La Doublure* and *La Vue*, rewarding correct recitation with presents: sweets, of course, or else quite often a new ribbon for the boy's Panama hat. Raymond Roussel took the two lads very seriously. In 1910, he gave a copy of *La Doublure* to Philippe Clément, who was then just thirteen, copying out four lines from page eighty-one on to the title-page and adding:

Written for Philippe Clément,
 18 September 1910.

One and a half months earlier, on 1 August 1910, he had also given Philippe Clément a copy on Japanese vellum of *Impressions d'Afrique*, with this revealing dedication (underlined by him):

Affectionately from the biggest of the three.

And, in February 1933, he sent him a copy of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* on Japanese vellum with these words:

To Philippe Clément, I present as a friend this continuation [!] of *Impressions d'Afrique*, for which he was kind enough to be indulgent.

A child's judgement had counted so much for him that he had not forgotten it twenty-three years later.

Roussel used his talents as an imitator to entertain the children, perfectly mimicking his mother's friends. But, above all, he taught them games that he had invented. One of them was like a nursery rhyme to learn numbers, or letters, with an added element of charades. Roussel was delighted to watch the children work out the solution. When they succeeded, he rewarded them with sumptuous presents, which they never refused but did feel were a little disproportionate compared to

their abilities.

Roussel led the life of a luxurious idler. He was refined and elegant. The children were especially impressed by his collection of neckties and canes, which he changed every day. Sometimes he would sit at the piano and give the children charming renditions of melodies by Reynaldo Hahn.

The children did not fail to notice that Roussel was greatly interested in a young German nanny who accompanied them. She was certainly attractive; but was that what drew him? No, he played jokes on her. One day, when he heard her exclaim over her needlework: "Ach! how annoying!" he told her: "No, that's very rude. You shouldn't say 'how annoying', but 'what a piss-off'". She did not forget the lesson and, a few days later, she exclaimed in front of Mme Clément: "what a piss-off!" When asked where she had learnt this expression, she relayed the episode in which she had fallen victim to Roussel's prank.

In September, Mme Roussel, her son, her servants, her doctors, their families and her dogs were in Biarritz. Guests did not have to bother about their luggage: a car called by to pick it up and deposit it. All this crowd — plus the trunks — took up a deal of space and when the railway timetables did not suit Mme Roussel she ordered a private train made up of a sleeping-carriage and a luggage car.

IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE

The Clément children presumably did not pay attention to the writings of their close friend as they were published in the newspapers. *Impressions d'Afrique* appeared in serial form in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* and "passed quite unnoticed", Roussel observed. The novel had been announced in the *À travers les livres* column of 30 June 1909:

Impressions d'Afrique. That is the title under which *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* will soon publish M. Raymond Roussel's new impressions in serial form.

This work, with its powerful descriptive intensity, contains vigorous passages in which sunrise and sunset, and the bright glittering of moonlight, have all the colouration of much-admired Eastern paintings.

Readers of such picturesque descriptions should certainly read with great interest *Impressions d'Afrique*, which they will be the first to see.

It is easy to understand why people who read this advertisement were later a little put out.

The first instalment appeared in the issue of 10-11 July 1909, beneath an anonymous illustration depicting the steamer *Lc Lyncée*. The serialisation finished four months later. This publication was in fact incomplete. In the issue of 21 August,

Roussel cut the Whirligig episode (on pages 96 to 100 of the novel);* on 6 November, seventy pages disappeared (pp.220-89 of the novel); finally, the last episode on 13 November finished with the fifth paragraph of Chapter XIII. Despite the words "to be continued next week", the last one hundred and fifty-five pages of the novel would have been completely missing if, on 20 November, the twentieth and last instalment of *Impressions d'Afrique* had not been published by *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* in a sixteen-page "supplement"! This was the only way Arthur Meyer could find to get rid of this serial while still satisfying both his "client" and his readership.

This first prose novel, conceived thanks to a new procedure Roussel had just perfected, created problems which the author had not previously experienced. It played on the double meaning of the "*lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard/pillard*",† and it is Claude Givaudan (later Carmichael), the white man, who finds himself up against the robber king and his hordes. After having apparently hesitated between verse and prose (about fifty alexandrines describe the singer Claude Givaudan in his dressing-room in Nice), Roussel began several episodes before writing:

It was six months before 12 April that I took ship in Marseilles aboard the *Sylphide* which was to have taken me to Buenos Aires.

The passengers of the *Sylphide* are shipwrecked on the territory of King Bangoya, then reach Lossion where they discover Blesnia and the Gambino river, attend the love-making of Flio (later Naïr, the name Flio returning subsequently in a different story) and Ferna (Jizme). Kings Bangoya and Tombola are naturally cruel, and Roussel makes no attempt to explain why, for his main interest is in the Gala of the Incomparables, which displays the skills of little Roger Dangles's cats, Bangoya's exercises on a bicycle and Tinglet's interrupted lectures on Racine and Charette. Compared to the two hundred pages of the first draft and its additions, the final version was nearly seven hundred and fifty pages long, which suggests a wearisome labour of crossings out and rewriting, of inking in of pages written in pencil, and of suppressions. Roussel then felt the need to have these pages typed up, before finally allotting them their places in the novel's two parts. A study of the drafts of *Impressions d'Afrique* will certainly teach us more about Raymond Roussel's writing and working methods than what he himself revealed in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*.

The changes of names are already intriguing. None of the steamers on the regular lines at that time was called *Sylphide*, or *Javclot* or *Lyncéc*. The latter was surely not chosen at random; Roussel must have been thinking of the Argonaut who bore the same name, who was famous for his extraordinary eyesight which allowed him to see through walls, and who was killed by Pollux for having tried to take away young Hilary from Castor. The presence of the Dioscuri behind the name *Lyncéc* hints at the obsession with twins that can often be seen in Roussel's work.

* Page references here correspond to the edition as published by Lemerre.

† "The white chalk letters on the cushion of the old billiard table" or "The letters of the white man concerning the troops of the old bandit".

Is the Africa of *Impressions d'Afrique* totally imaginary? We can suppose that Roussel researched the subject before writing his novel when we read in *New Impressions of Africa* the following allusions to his own *Impressions*:

In his *Impressions* the false explorer
Who [...] Starts with some great hydrological feat
On a broad river [...] Follows the end [...] with this fact [...] That is, that when it spills into the sea
It stays saltless over a large extent.

Where had Roussel read that the current of a great (African) river was so powerful that at its mouth fresh water did not mix with salt water? This cannot be the Tez, for he mentions nothing of the sort about it. However, Roussel does give us three geographical locations: Bougie, Tripoli and Porto Novo, the first two of which are puns.* Jean Ferry thus managed to locate Ejur to the south, in Nigeria, on the Atlantic coast three hundred kilometres from Porto Novo.† “In the end, *Impressions of Africa* leaves an impression of Africa,” wrote Jean Cocteau in *Opium*. “The story of the Zouave is the only example in literature comparable to a certain sort of painting being explored by our friend [Wilhelm] Uhde, and which he calls painting *of the sacred heart*.” More precisely, *Impressions of Africa*, with its Zouave Velbar, leaves an impression of Loti’s *Le Roman d’un Spahi*, and the black Nyaor is almost an anagram of Yaour. We cannot help but think that Pierre Loti’s illustrations for his novel made a large impression on Roussel: the Rue de Guet-n’dar, the copse of baobabs, the Rue de Dakar, the little outpost of Gadiangue, the fantastic deserted landscapes, thus did Roussel see Africa in the illustrated editions of *Le Roman d’un Spahi*. Loti’s Africa was Senegal; that of Roussel was Dahomey, and the campaign conducted by General Dodds against Behanzin, which was still fresh in people’s memory, must also have made an impression on the young Raymond of 1893-4, when he was seventeen and had started to write.

But isn’t Behuliphruen (reminiscent of Pierre Loti’s copse of baobabs) at least in part a Rousselian description of the property in Neuilly? In a letter to Robert de Montesquiou, who sent him a plant for his garden some years later, Roussel thanked him for having told him of the existence of the *Pittosporum*, which he regretted not having introduced into his Behuliphruen. It is also known that Roussel introduced several details from real life into *Impressions d’Afrique*: his cobbler, Hellstern, shoes made to measure, 5, Place Vendôme (he was right to say that “the number five was picked random; I do not think that it is correct”, for the actual address was 23, Place Vendôme); an advertisement for the “Phonotypia” phonograph (which became “*faussc note tibia*” [“tibia with a wrong note”], for the use of the Breton Lelgoualch);

* On “candle” and “polite selection”.

† To Louis Rousselet (1845-1929), himself author of travel books and the namesake of a murderer (see p.289 below), Raymond Roussel sent a copy of *Impressions d’Afrique* with this note: “I respectfully present you with my travel notes... the exact authenticity of which I dare not guarantee.”



and the *patience* with “*entiche ambre mine hystérique*” [“polishing-board” with “infatuate amber mine hysterical”] definitely comes from a Caran d’Ache album published by Plon in 1898, in which a cartoon entitled “*C’est à prendre ou à laisser: ‘Antichambre ministérielle’*” is the first image in a series of “‘Variations on a theme’: a little patience!” Despite Roussel’s claims, reality, in the form of a secret underground autobiography, did in fact occupy a small place in what he wrote, and this novel certainly contains many other references to current affairs. Talu’s royal ordinal number irresistably calls to mind of that of Edward VII, whom Roussel may have met in Biarritz with his mother prior to 1904. His name also chimes with the “Talou region” — Arques is the prefecture, and only seven kilometres from Dieppe it was well known to Raymond Roussel. In 1904, he had himself photographed with his nephew Robert de Breteuil next to a signpost indicating the “Rond Duquesne”, where the Henri-IV forest road joins the Route de la Commission and the Route Duquesne.* Roussel, his mother and his sister regularly went to Dieppe to visit the d’Albuféras: Michel Ney, Louis d’Albuféra, Caroline, Paul and Pierre Murat all spent their childhoods in the gardens of the Palais Masséna, in Nice, Dieppe, Biarritz and Paris. In Dieppe, Raymond Roussel must also have been invited to the Bas-Fort-Blanc chalet of his friend Jacques-Émile Blanche, a portrait painter who unfortunately does not seem to have drawn his face or figure.†

Roussel looked elsewhere than to the Dark Continent for the reality of his Africa. It did not come from travellers’ impressions, but from a tale he himself had written ten years before, entitled *Parmi les Noirs*. He then “amplified” his procedure and no longer complied solely with the strict rule of having two almost identical sentences which served as a framework for his early stories: when the mechanism for exciting an over-lively imagination — or else, as Annie Le Brun thinks, for *checking* it — was set in motion, he allowed himself some freedom with his constraints: the word “*lettres*”, he tells us, was not retained, Hellstern lived at number 5, not number 23, and so on. By so doing, and acknowledging as much in his posthumous book, Roussel once again proves that his procedure is a procedure for writing, not for reading.

What he does not tell us is what makes him choose one “banal” sentence rather than another. A song learnt in childhood, captions on cartoons, trademarks and advertisements, and even his own earlier works — for example, in *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, he explains the use made of his poem *La Source*, in which, he emphasises, no particular procedure was used. The lines:

*Elle commence tôt sa tournée, asticote
Avec un parti-pris de rudesse ses gens
Qui tous seraient, à l’en croire, inintelligents;
Elle invente toujours quelque détail qui cloche‡*

give rise to the Mopsus the Cockerel episode in *Locus Solus*:

* Personal communication from Jacques Caumont.

† The communications from Raymond Roussel to Jacques-Émile Blanche underline the admiration an “old friend” felt for a “greatly prestigious artist... and such a faithful friend”.

‡ She starts her rounds early, needling / With determined harshness her people / Who, if she’s to be believed, are all unintelligent; / She always invents some incongruous detail.

Ailé coma... Saturne Élastique hotte
Ave cote part type des rues d'essai sauge
*Qui toux sert...**

The manuscripts kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale reveal that Roussel later started to do the same thing with certain lines of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. But he never explained why. He did, however, admit that the procedure was similar to rhyme, or rather to puns, but was above all musical; from this we can understand why he turned to poetry sometimes. Echoes, homophony and counterpoint are all rhetorical techniques. Roussel, who was a musician, quickly realised that, as in music, literary procedures must be invisible and hidden. It is strange that this "rhyming mania" in both his prose, and in the poetry he wrote as *bouts rimés*, was not noticed by Dr Janet.

One of *Impressions of Africa*'s most mysterious characters is the narrator. He appears in the opening passage: "Before me lay the immense Trophies Square...", then promptly disappears only to return on the last page of the novel's first part when he offers Carmichael his help; then, of course, he is present throughout the second part. It is strange that this witness (who is a little like Juillard, "agreeably well off", undertaking "continual pleasure trips"; a little like Carmichael, the singer with the female voice; also like Balbet, the shooting champion; or else like Bob Bucharessas, the imitator; in fact, extremely like Raymond Roussel) is not one of the "Incomparables" and has no more character than the lowly sailors on the *Lyncée*.

Raymond Roussel, of course, had *Impressions d'Afrique* published by Lemerre at his own expense. The serialisation in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* was not quite over when, on 2 October 1909, the book's publication was completed in the printing-rooms on Rue des Bergers.† At the top of page one of the text‡ there is a small printed green sticker:

NOTICE

Readers who are uninitiated into the art of Raymond Roussel would do well to read this book first from page 212 to page 455, then from page 1 to page 211.

Were there then some *initiated* readers? This is perhaps not impossible. Readers of the serialisation in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* may well have expressed their disappointment at seeing the same scenes being repeated in the middle of the novel. The first part tells what happens on 25 June, but without our knowing what had occurred since 15 March. The past is revealed only in the second part, where Roussel tells the tales that justify the tableaux in the first half. Although Robert de Montesquiou was right to say: "The second half of the work explains everything, with something more than just a satisfying logic, with a mathematical precision," it must be admitted that the French novel had not yet accustomed its readers to this sort of mental gymnastics. As

* Winged coma... Saturn, Elastic basket / Ave rating portion lad from streets of try sauge / Which cough serves...

† Copies of the "second edition" have the same publication date as the first.

‡ This page one would be numbered five according to current practice (in the Pauvert edition it is numbered seven). All publishers at the time worked like that; it is modern-day publishers that puff up little novels by making them start on page nine, or even page eleven.

* "... this quite insufficiently titled book, *Impressions d'Afrique*, by an author whose imagination was certainly capable of finding better," Robert de Montesquiou, *Élus et Appelés*.

† Five of these parchment copies are known: *Impressions d'Afrique*, *Locus Solus*, *L'Étoile au Front* and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, which contain the following handwritten note: "I leave this book, printed on parchment, to the Bibliothèque Nationale rue de Richelieu Paris / Raymond Roussel / 20 May 1933"; as for the copy of *La Poussière de Soleils*, it does not contain this inscription by Roussel, and it slipped through the donation of books and manuscripts to the BN in 1989. It was then offered for sale in Paris in December 1996 (at the same time as the manuscript) despite the wishes of Raymond Roussel, expressed in his will of 20 January 1933, that "all of [his] books printed on parchment" were to be bequeathed to the Bibliothèque Nationale (see p.329 for this will). It is worth noting that the parchment copy of *Impressions d'Afrique* has the same publication date as the reissue of 1932, which leads us to suppose that Roussel's practice of having a parchment copy made does not predate the publication of *Locus Solus* (of which at least one other parchment copy is known to exist).

early as 1897, Roussel had felt it necessary to warn readers of *La Doublure* that his poem was a novel — a wise precaution, taken in good time and before the book was printed. This time, the notice stuck on the first page had not been planned in advance, and appears as an afterthought. Why had it not occurred to Roussel before? Some of his "initiated" readers must have pointed out to him that average readers would think that the "explanations" in the second part had come rather late and, disorientated, would already have stopped reading a serialisation which they were incapable of following. Roussel wanted more than anything to be read, but as the book had already been printed he could make no further changes to it, and so had to content himself with this label. He thus thought that the printed novel would be better understood than the newspaper serialisation.

The title, *Impressions d'Afrique*, has inspired a number of commentaries and left many perplexed.* These "impressions" are the "letters of the white man" from *Parmi les Noirs*, which Roussel has sent for *impression*, i.e. "publication". The double meaning is obvious: these impressions of a White about Blacks are printed in black and white, with black letters on white paper. But what of Africa? It seems to be there only because of the blacks in the tale. And yet we can also see in it the application of one of Roussel's basic techniques: the association of two words linked by the preposition *à* which, "taken in a meaning other than the primary one", give the title of the novel another signification. We are supposed to read: 1st *impressions* (sensations) (d') *Afrique* (continent); 2nd *impression* (printing) *à fric* (at the author's expense). Such an interpretation would not surprise Rousseliens. They know that Roussel, who was *au fric* ["loaded"], had no qualms about using slang. After his death, in fact, in *La Volonté* of 2 August 1933, a gossip columnist was to remember "those *Impressions d'Afrique* which a punster renamed '*Impressions de fric*' ..."; this would certainly not have displeased Roussel! Finally, it should be pointed out that such a reading of the title better explains *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, where the scene is set not in black Africa but in Egypt, and which, like the earlier volume, Roussel had published at his own expense.

Roussel was very particular about the publication of his books. *Impressions d'Afrique* was the first of his works to have a special limited edition printed on Japanese vellum, which was unnumbered (presumably about a hundred were printed); he had bibliophiles in mind, and it was generally these *de luxe* copies that he gave to friends. He would later go even further by having a single copy of each of his works printed on parchment in a white cover, bound by Gruel.†

M. Eugène Vallée, printer at the Imprimerie Lemerre on Rue des Bergers, told Michel Leiris that Raymond Roussel attached the greatest importance to punctuation and misprints "demanding as many sets of proofs as necessary until the finished copy contained not one single mistake". He paid the price requested for this, and even promised a bonus of five gold francs to the worker who found any mistake he had

missed. We can thus suppose that the spelling of “*terrein*” in *L’Étoile au Front* (where it little matters, in fact, since the text was written to be heard rather than read) may very well have been intentional, or else have been suggested by a printer, dictionary in hand, claiming that “*terrain*” was a mistake in the hope of getting the five franc bonus!

“Several minor changes were made to the original text of the ‘fourth edition’ of *Impressions d’Afrique*:* inappropriate words (for example: ‘*ombrageux*’ for ‘*ombreux*’), slight grammatical mistakes, repetitions, etc.”. The text Roussel gave the printer, contrary to what we would expect of such a meticulous man, whose manuscripts show signs of constantly being recopied and retyped, was never definitive, in particular the names of the characters which “in many cases” he left blank, adding them in only at the proof stage, without any concern for the necessary resetting. Or else he asked Eugène Vallée to do it himself; but in this case he nearly always replaced the printer’s suggestions with other names. This can be seen in the manuscript of *La Scine*, where the names of the characters were often added in a different handwriting. If the choice of a name was so difficult for him, Roussel still seemed to consider it highly important: the manuscripts of *Locus Solus* contain signs, of his hesitations. And if the way in which they were composed is often unclear, some approximate homophonies can be made out (Gillette Egroïzard barely conceals a Gillette razor) as too anagrams (Duhl Séroul is a near relation of Roussel).

CRITICS AND INITIATED READERS

The Lemerre company was not so fussy. It was content to look after its accounts. On 8 October 1909, Lemerre demanded 2409 francs for printing 1100 copies, of which ninety-two were sent to the press and 188 handed over to the author. In May 1911, the cost of printing and advertising *Impressions d’Afrique* in the newspapers rose to 6809.50 francs, against a credit of 280.50 francs for the sale of 187 copies that same day. “When this volume appeared in the bookshops, nobody paid any attention,” Roussel wrote. Sure enough, it took twenty-two years for the first edition to be sold out. “Only Edmond Rostand, to whom I had sent a copy, understood it at once, became keen on it and talked about it to everyone, even reading out extracts of it to his friends.”

In 1910, Edmond Rostand received a copy with the following hyperbolic inscription:

to Edmond Rostand, to the messiah of modern times, with the compliments of an unexpressible enthusiasm.

* In this “fourth edition”, whose publication date is 1932, is an announcement for *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, which was published on 30 June 1932. Despite the corrections made to the text, the copies still contain the green paper “notice” stuck on page one.

He wrote a letter to Roussel, part of which was cited in the collection of quotations inserted into Roussel's books in 1927. It mentions the same episode as the one that was to catch André Gide's eye fifteen years later:

... I cannot shift from my mind the remarkably poetic vision of Fogar, and can still see him offering the extraordinary banner that dangles down its own shaft, the mysterious piece of angelica extracted from his vein.*

The Roussel family were friends of the Rostands. Mme Roussel, who sometimes went to Cambo, visited them on their "Arnaga" estate, and the Rostands often went to Biarritz. After Edmond Rostand's death, Raymond Roussel would remain friendly with his son Maurice.† What is more, Roussel had been influenced by the father. The "chopped-up" alexandrines of *La Seine* certainly seem to have been liberated by those of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. An echo of the duel ballad occurs in *Chiquenaude*. Another one can be found in *The Star on the Forehead* (Act I, scene IV), where the second act of Fresle's comic opera *The Lanceprisado* "takes place in a besieged fortress. / Where, during a truce, the heroine and her valet Lafleur, who is loaded down with provisions, manages to slip in to rejoin a handsome captain. / ... the little garrison has been starving for quite some time, so it greets the arrival of food in the wildest and most ecstatic manner."‡

The book had only just been published when, on 2 October, Roussel wrote this inscription§ to Baron Xavier Reille:

to Xavier Reille, author of poems, very tender compliments from a brother and colleague.
Raymond, 11 October 1909.

Such tender inscriptions, signed with just Roussel's first name, are rare. But Xavier Reille was a childhood friend, one of the three sons of Baron René Reille, who was Marshal Reille's son and Masséna's grandson. Xavier, who was born in 1871 in Saint-Amans-Soult, in the Tarn where his father was Deputy, was a little over five years older than Raymond Roussel. After studying at the Polytechnique and resigning from the artillery, he became a landowner, married Mlle de Cholet, and in turn got himself elected Deputy of the Tarn in the first constituency of Castres in 1898, there replacing his elder brother. He was re-elected in 1902 and 1906, and became a General Councillor and Mayor of his home town. He was indeed an "author of poems", which had been published by Henri Lecler in 1904 as *Semaine de jeunesse* and, in 1908, by Plon in a collection called *Échos et chansons*. In the latter collection, the poem entitled "*Un désespéré*" ["A Desperate Man"] could apply as much (and as little) to Raymond Roussel as to his brother Georges or his brother-in-law Charles Ney, or to any other "fop". It concerns a dandy who, after being coddled by his mother, chases away his ennui by leading "that restive and futile

* This letter seems to have been lost. The Roussel archive at the BN contains only Rostand's telegrams.

† The *Cahier de copies de ses envois*, in which Roussel noted down the recipients of signed copies of his books, along with the inscriptions the latter contained, includes many friendly or admiring inscriptions to Maurice Rostand, and also records Roussel's respectful admiration of Mme Rostand under her pen-name, Rosemonde Gérard.

‡ Translation by Martin Sorrell.

§ Communicated by Pascal Pia.

life / That so many young men lead in Paris": the Bois de Boulogne, polo, tennis, gambling and alcohol. In the end, he commits suicide in his bed with a revolver:

... and for his mother
He left only a bitterly ironic note,
On some paper, on his bedside table:
"Some die of hunger; but I died of ennui."

Raymond Roussel was also to give Xavier a copy of *Locus Solus* with the words "in memory of a delighted reader". Since the publication date for *Impressions d'Afrique* was 2 October 1909, Roussel certainly did not wait before giving it to Xavier Reille; the cover bears the date 1910, he did his service only in February 1910, and the copyright registration was only made on 15 April.

All the same, Roussel was wrong to complain so much. It is not true that "nobody paid any attention". This was what he wrote in 1932, but in 1912 he included a paper entitled "*Opinions of the press concerning the book Impressions d'Afrique from which the author has adapted this play*" in the programme for the stage version at the Théâtre Antoine:

It was from his book, *Impressions d'Afrique*, that M. Raymond Roussel adapted this play which, according to Louis Ganderax, "presents the following peculiar mixture: *adventure story, scientific fantasy and philosophical comedy*" and about which Guillot de Saix has said, in the *Bonne Chanson* [Théodore Botrel's review]: "It is a strange alloy of crazy inventions, in which d'Ennery* and Jules Verne seem to have collaborated with Shakespeare".

Here are a few opinions pronounced by critics when the book came out:

M. Paul Reboux, of the *Journal*:

"It is an extraordinary, breathtaking, humorous, chimerical book; and thus, one that does not leave us indifferent. M. Raymond Roussel has imagined a marvellous machine, with a hoard of truly astonishing details, circumstances never before brought together and events not yet realised. If this were done without method, it would sound like the wandering of a deranged mind. But not for a moment does his logic slip and his style, which is clear, pure and precise, is faultless. He cunningly draws us after him to follow the developments and we travel a long way before stopping and saying: 'Ah! how strange!... is he going mad?... or am I?' It is very strange."

Simon Crosmières, in the review *La Flamme*:

"On opening M. Raymond Roussel's book I imagined that it would be the more or less highly coloured tale of his travels in Africa. The opening passage astonished me; by page three I wondered if I had not become the plaything of some hallucination; I carefully re-read the book from the beginning and understood that these *Impressions of Africa* were fictional and simply a pretext chosen by M. Raymond Roussel to give his imagination free rein. I was then totally gripped and read the entire book in one night.

"M. Raymond Roussel is a disciple of Poe and Wells. But at no time do we feel that he is imitating them; his imagination, while being fantastical, remains extremely personal. And I am thankful to him, for he has given me that extremely rare pleasure of finding myself face-to-face with an original talent. It would be impossible to try to analyse this book, since a detailed summary would be necessary, and I lack space; nor can one quote, for everything is written in that same fluent, clear and sharp style. If M. Raymond Roussel keeps the promise he has made in *Impressions of Africa*, and I think he will, he will surely occupy an enviable place in

* Nineteenth-century French playwright and librettist of Massenet's *Le Cid*.

contemporary literature.”

Mr Sterling Heiling, from an article reproduced in the main American newspapers:

“In Raymond Roussel, Paris has just discovered a new Rabelais, and in *Impressions of Africa*, a literary masterpiece in the enigmatic tradition of *Pantagruel* [...]. In his *Impressions of Africa*, Raymond Roussel has shown himself to be not only a master of French prose, but also a philosopher of men and of things, gifted with Rabelais’s style which, for the last four hundred years, had been thought inimitable.”*

M. Henri Lapauze, in *Le Gaulois*:

“It is with the full force of his mind that M. Raymond Roussel has turned his attention towards the Orient [?], and brought back a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* which would astonish Dr Mardrus himself. None of those that envy him can claim to have an imagination of such quality.”

M. Gaston Pollonais:

“I am not afraid to say that, since Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, our literature has not been enriched by such powerful descriptive passages and such highly coloured frescos.”

To this choice of articles included in the programme of 1912, we must add the one by Frantz Richard in the *Revue internationale illustrée*, and cited by “Ergaste” in *Le Théâtre* (no. 323, June 1912):

I thought I would find a traveller, but I discovered a sorcerer with whom I made the most extraordinary journey to the sun or the moon that has been attempted since Cyrano. [...] Like Balzac, M. Raymond Roussel creates his own world; a new world with its own customs, history, habits, monuments, inventions and games.

And the article by Léon Landau in *La France* of 20 February 1910:

... a work which must be read slowly and attentively so that the reader can soak up the local colour the author has painted of the far-off lands where the action takes place. M. Raymond Roussel seems to have a novel, quick-witted imagination, which enjoys untrodden paths, amassing the details.

In Robert de Montesquiou, who was to read *Impressions d’Afrique* two years after it came out, Roussel was to have an enthusiastic critic of “that book which is at once scientific, musical and extravagant”. Here is part of the study he made of it in *Élus et Appelés*:

... I know that this could be termed *humour*, but there are degrees of humour, just as there are of vice and virtue; in these circumstances, the degrees become notches and I can assure you that this is the last notch open to anyone’s attention, who wants to avoid becoming cracked. [...]

What is characteristic of this singular approach is the love of the literary logogriph whose explanation is revealed only much later; a taste for cutting up events then throwing the fragments into a hat (even if it were the most astonishing of “bowlers”), for putting them back together at the end as if it were an impeccable jigsaw puzzle. This taste even appears so strong in M. Roussel that it seems to me to be the cause (or at least a good part of it) for his arrival in literature; he wanted to read this and, as no other author could supply him, he became *his own reader*.

* On 11 December 1910, Sterling Heiling did indeed publish the same article under three different headlines in three different newspapers: in the *Sunday Record-Herald* of Chicago, “A Millionaire Philosopher: Paris discovers a second Rabelais with Raymond Roussel and his *Impressions of Africa*. ‘Amusing, complicated, ingenious,’ says Rostand”; in the *New York Sunday Morning*, “A young Parisian rolling in gold and reminiscent of Rabelais”; in the *Times Democrat*, “A young Parisian multi-millionaire, who prefers working to throwing his money out of the window”. Lastly, on 18 December, *Plain Dealer Magazine* also devoted a page to the “richest millionaire in Paris” who “really likes to work”.

To illustrate these articles, Roussel provided the famous photograph taken in Milan in 1896 when he was nineteen. It was thus not only in 1933 that he wanted to be known by his youthful appearance, but already more than twenty years before at the age of thirty-three. Other photos show the town house in Rue de Chaillot, to which Sterling Heiling was invited, as well as a drawing of an episode in *Romeo and Juliet* published in *Comœdia*.

Robert de Montesquiou added: "M. Roussel has an admirer, whose name he one day entrusted me with; this name is so well known that I cannot reveal it; my own quite vanishes under the flash of such blinding celebrity". This evidently refers to Edmond Rostand.

We can understand why Roussel did not republish the notice published in *Polybiblion*, the universal bibliographical review (2nd series, vol 72, CXIXth of the collection, July 1910, page 8): "Look and judge", Louis Dimier wrote simply, quoting a passage describing the working of the painting-machine, before adding:

There are four hundred and forty-five pages of this. Not once was I able to seize the point, nor even to understand vaguely what it was all about. Only, at the beginning, does the author announce that he will relate "the coronation of Talu VII, Emperor of Ponukele, King of Drelekaff [sic]". But the point remains a mystery.

Roussel presumably did not know André Breton's opinion of *Impressions d'Afrique*, nor of the place he set aside for it in Jacques Doucet's "Bibliothèque idéale" (letter of 9 February 1921):

His book, *Impressions d'Afrique*, seems to me to participate in the most recent poetic ideas and to hold an important place in the world of the imagination. I do not think that this novel is a masterpiece (its form is rather vulgar), but its thinking is really strange and the fancy takes on an extremely rare constructive or architectural appearance. It was this book, I think, which was adapted into the play performed in 1913 at the Théâtre des Arts, the leading actor of which agreed to put up with the audience's reaction only at the price of a pearl given to him by the author before each performance.

"QUEER NOTIONS"

In 1910, the year *Impressions d'Afrique* was published, Roussel (or his mother?) commissioned Anna Quinquand to sculpt his bust; this has not been rediscovered any more than the one by René Rozet, executed in 1886.*

But it was another event which was to mark Raymond Roussel's life forever. Certainly he continued to see his friends and, at Juliette Leiris's wedding on 2 June 1910, he spent the entire day with the young people, sitting at the piano and singing Massenet's *La Petite Maison grise* for the young Mme Jannet. He also adopted new habits that year: Raymond Roussel took an "official" mistress. The two of them were never to leave each other again.

At the end of his life, in *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, he cites "*paravent*" ["screen"] as one of the ambiguous words used in *Impressions d'Afrique*: "1st *paravent* [furnishing] *à jour* [hole existing in the screen]; 2nd *paravent* [woman serving as a screen] *à jour* [day of a reception]; hence Jizme, who serves as a screen

* Inscriptions to Mlle Anna Quinquand: "with respectful compliments from her model and admirer" (*Pages Choiesies*); "in recollection of those charming sittings I now miss" (*La Poussière de soleils*) To the sculptor René Rozet we have: "admiring recollections from his long-ago model" (*Locus Solus*).

and has days with receptions.”

And as Michel Ney said to Jean Chatard: “Actually, he had a second life that few people knew about. For example, I can tell you that he was a member of a temperance league and that otherwise... Otherwise?... You understand?... He had a double personality.”

We can wonder whether, at the time of his breakdown, Raymond Roussel had had any sexual experiences. As Adrien Proust watched over the impure and onanistic slumbers of the young Marcel and sent him off to be made a man at his grandfather's expense, so Raymond's mother may have, following her doctor's advice, given her son over to an experienced woman, as was common practice at the time. But taking a mistress at the age of thirty-five was far rarer: before marriage (at about thirty for men), young men generally had recourse to “kept women” who saved them from seeking out risky chance encounters with streetwalkers or with prostitutes in brothels.

My heart beats hard and palpitates,
The woman reaches out her arms;
At last I rush to her embrace
But cannot capture still her charms.

As in this stanza from *Mon Âme*, Roussel felt the need to affirm a certain normality in his narrative poems and his novels, through the presence of heterosexual couples.

According to Dr Pierre Janet:

Martial remarks that, these days, women wear extremely skimpy clothes, he is indignant about the displays of naked women it is fashionable to see in certain theatres; he cannot think without sadness of young girls from good families who nurse wounded men in ambulances, paint in art studios or are exposed in this way to seeing naked people. “How is it permitted that young women are allowed to look at half-naked athletes? Swimming races should be banned, the licence of certain posters withdrawn and nudes be made the object of strict legislation.” This might be taken for a moral idea in a scrupulous person; not at all. Martial has no sexual scruples for himself, he fully accepts bad behaviour among men and women and, when he protests against nudes, he is not at all worried about the possible increase in debauchery that could result from such displays. “If people practise forbidden acts behind closed doors, knowing that they are wrong, and if people expose themselves to punishments or at least to the scorn of respectable individuals, then that is fine; but if we can see nudes, if we can gain sexual pleasure just by watching a public show, with no danger of punishment, with one's parents' agreement and while pretending to remain chaste, that is unacceptable. Everything to do with love should remain rare, forbidden, difficult of access; to see a naked man should be a revelation for a young girl, and not the daily routine of hospitals or studios. If women's breasts are shown in public, there will be no more pleasure in glimpsing them; we must not remove the charm of the forbidden fruit or risk losing the fascination of the secret garden. It is devaluation by abasement.

Was he really talking for himself, or was his attitude dictated by social

conventions? Roussel seems to have played a certain role in front of Janet, who can hardly have been taken in, and by expressing an interest in the education of young girls he shows an interest in female bodies, which does not coincide with what we know about the nature of his “queer notions” (as he described them in a letter to his mother in October 1902). In *The Seine* he claimed:

POINDRON (*looking at two women waltzing together*)

It is always enticing
Two women dancing well, together.

JOSEPH VERRAILLOUX

Two men dancing
Together is horrible, for instance.

POINDRON

Oh, it's quite ugly.

There are not many references to physical love in Roussel's works, but the few that exist have a certain pungency, while the feelings of lovers are always expressed in a highly conventional manner. In *La Doublure*, Roberte meets Paul at his house:

... now he tips

Her on him, tumbling in a chair; his lips
Are raised up towards hers, as though they were
Attracting her, then rest there; now it's her
Turn to kiss him, wrap her arms round her prize
And, extremely weary, with half-closed eyes,
Dropping down on to him with all her strength.
The back of the chair then creaked at some length.

There is the same “position” in an unfinished poem:

She, on his lap, hugs him with both her arms
And tenders her mouth [...]
She droops in a weary posture [...]
Sometimes embracing him harder [...]
Tightening his grip he squanders
His kisses...

Roussel's erotic imagination was rather limited. Fortunately, this was only the foreplay, for the two lovers are later to be found in bed. But if you are expecting more, then you risk being disappointed:

The bed-sheet undulates over them
Covering them up to their necks.

But what perhaps excited the young man of 1896 was no longer sufficient for the mature man of 1932. In the sixth of the *Documents to Serve as an Outline*, the emigrant who takes ship exchanges with his mistress “a racy mutual oath: at appointed days and hours, each, thinking of the other and gazing at the *Coma Berenices* in the heavens, will commit a voluptuous solitary sin”.*

Nevertheless, what seems to be true, and was confirmed to Michel Leiris by several witnesses, is that “never did he sleep with a woman”. Roussel would not have tolerated that at any price: coming out of the Trianon-Lyrique one evening with Charlotte Dufrène, he pointed to an old man picking up cigarette butts and told her that he would rather be like him than have to marry a woman, no matter how beautiful or rich she was.

Among friends, it was only known that one day in his youth he had been caught with a groom in the stables of the town house on Rue de Chaillot. Taking dictation from Charlotte Dufrène, Michel Leiris wrote in his notebook: “While young, when his mother lived on Rue de Marignan, he had been seen with a groom, hence a scandal that had to be hushed up.” In his family, his servant and his driver were also mentioned. It was also supposed that he had been blackmailed. Did not Charlotte Dufrène tell Michel Leiris that the purpose of each of his journeys was to escape from this?

In reality, Raymond Roussel was the one who lived briefly at 14, Rue de Marignan, where his mother wrote to him in 1900. Was it him or her that had decided it would be better for him to have his own bachelor flat, near Rue de Chaillot? He did not stay there long for, on 18 July 1903, he rented furnished rooms on the ground floor, to the left of the main gateway, at 164, Boulevard Haussmann,† which included a hall, bedroom, dressing-room, small living-room, smoking-room, corridor, a toilet with English-style pan, and a kitchen.

Four months earlier, on 11 March 1903, a certain Louis Blanc, one of Raymond Roussel’s servants, was sentenced to five years in prison and fined 500 francs for extortion! (On 29 April 1904, the appeal court in Paris confirmed the sentence of 1903.) Thanks to an intervention in his favour by Marc Lapierre, a former solicitor, a publicist and director of *La Cocarde*,‡ Louis Blanc addressed a demand for remission to the Minister of Justice. Émile-Paul Roy, the police commissioner, accordingly questioned Roussel on 5 January 1905: “I consider,” Roussel declared, “that M. Blanc’s demand for remission, instigated by a certain M. Lapierre, is simply a new form of blackmail. At no time was there any contract between M. Blanc and myself, written or oral, which could have — I would not say justified the demands for money which resulted in his sentence in 1903 — ever been used as a pretext for such demands.”

Raymond Roussel then reminded him that he had asked Lapierre to quieten Blanc down, that he had given him 90,000 francs [!], and had taken out an insurance policy for him... What is more, Lapierre had asked him for 100,000 francs.

* Translation by John Ashbery.

† A plaque on the wall at number 162 indicates that André de Fouquières (1874-1959) lived and died there.

‡ The former daily paper of Paul Déroulède and of the League of Patriots, *La Cocarde* was the first newspaper to present its headlines across the front page, sometimes covering the entire width, in order to get round the law forbidding vendors to call out the leading stories.

On 9 February 1905, Commissioner Roy questioned Lapierre, who declared: "I learnt, either from Blanc, or from Roussel's admissions, that the house at 10, Rue Saint-Joseph [in the second *arrondissement*, in the Sentier; it was the house where Émile Zola was born] had been furnished with Roussel's money so as to receive under-age boys. Blanc confessed to me that fourteen children [!] had been handed over to Roussel, that two or three of them were not yet thirteen, and that there was even one aged eleven [...]. I was to pay or settle for Roussel any demands for money from the children or their representatives, but above all I was to stop Blanc from making claims." Lapierre also restated that Roussel's carryings-on in Rue Saint-Joseph went back to April 1898. He no doubt meant to insinuate that Roussel was then still a major, and not himself the poor victim of child abuse.

After the inquiry, the appeal-court prosecutor concluded: "The facts that resulted in the sentence are related in the warrant referred to above, which specifies the menaces Blanc used, on several occasions in less than three years, in order to extort sums of money from Roussel, how these were both written and oral and that they constituted threats, coming from Blanc, that if Roussel did not pay the sums of money demanded, then he would reveal all by means of an account which would be openly published, stating that together they had participated in acts of pederasty, and that it was thanks to these threats of defamatory revelations, which so frightened Roussel, that Blanc was able to make Roussel pay him the money he extorted."

These considerations confirm what Roussel told Commissioner Roy: that Lapierre, to get Louis Blanc released (Blanc was, quite probably, the "groom" with whom the young Roussel had been "caught"), was repeating a defamatory confession which Blanc had made to him... But all that Justice saw in this tardy statement was the desire to sully the spotless reputation of an honourable family. Blanc's demand for remission was rejected.

The only certitude that emerges from reading this file* is that Roussel was definitely a victim of blackmail on numerous occasions, just as Michel Leiris suspected. Perhaps military service was, during this period of his life, a convenient refuge.

Thanks to Charlotte Dufrène, we know that he had relations only with "people who were not of his milieu"; and that during a journey they had made in Algeria and Tunisia after the 1914-18 war, she had met him one evening in the company of "dockers". Roussel had a predilection for low-life encounters:

For I need cynical love
Where the thrill is a shove
On stinking pallets...

"He loved blue tunics and sailors' uniforms with red pompoms," Michel Leiris noted, taking down Charlotte Dufrène's words. Michel Ney, confiding to Jean Chatard, spoke of fights in sailors' bars. Sailors, plumbers, navvies... But Roussel

* Archives Nationales BB 18, dossier 6270 (1904-1905), 51 BL 1293.

also gave money to dubious actors and regimental comrades in arms, without our knowing whether this was for services rendered or because of blackmail. According to his mother, the friendship between Raymond Roussel and Reynaldo Hahn, whom she would invite round to dinner, had given rise to "gossip".

It has been asked if Raymond Roussel's homosexuality resulted from a certain sexual impotence; at one time in his life, he took Yo-Androl, made by the Iscovesco laboratories (107, Rue des Dames [?], Paris), "the direct action of which on genital organs has been demonstrated in numerous studies".

CHARLOTTE DUFRÈNE

Whether it was him or, as is more probable, his mother that made the decision, to prevent gossip, Raymond Roussel needed a woman friend who would be seen with him in public and of course at the theatre. According to John Ashbery, to whom Charlotte Dufrène gave the photograph in which she posed with Roussel, the idea was also to make his sister the Duchesse d'Elchingen believe that he was normally inclined and had a mistress. Nothing was impossible in that family, and we know that at around the same time Mme Roussel had fallen out with her daughter, but we do not know why. The Duc and Duchesse d'Elchingen were already living apart and it is quite likely that Germaine did not know that Charles Ney had personally introduced Charlotte Dufrène to her brother. The young woman was at the time the mistress of Comte Bertrand de Valon, who was master of the hounds for Prince Murat's stag-hunting excursions in the forest of Senlis and, like Charles Ney, a member of the Jockey-Club.* "The Comte de Valon, curly hair, fair moustache, courtly and friendly, king of stag hunting";† if we can believe the recollections of Jane Avril, this "handsome Comte de Valon" was someone who took girls from the Moulin Rouge to introduce them into high society. Although he was very much in love, according to Charlotte Dufrène, the Comte de Valon went on to marry Mlle Barrachin; Charlotte had to make a break, at least to save face. By accepting the role, as she herself put it, of "smoke screen" for a rich homosexual, Charlotte Dufrène remained faithful to her first love; and Charles Ney, while helping out a friend in difficulties, was also doing his brother-in-law Raymond a good turn. He had a sincere liking for Roussel and even offered to make him a member of the Jockey-Club, but Roussel declined.

Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris that she was then living in Chamant, at the edge of Senlis, where there was a large stud farm. She had a small open gig, and a buggy with a pony, but had been told that during hunt days she should avoid the pack and try to keep out of the way. She was an excellent rider. She wore a lady's riding-habit, a long, full skirt from Kriegck (28, Boulevard des Italiens), with her blonde hair

* The second Prince de la Moskowa was in fact one of the Jockey-Club's founder members in 1833, along with the Duc d'Orléans, the Duc de Nemours, Lord Henry Seymour, the Comte Demidoff, the Duc d'Albuféra, Achille Fould, etc.

† Gabriel Astruc, *Le Pavillon des fantômes*, 1929.

pinned up in a bun under her riding-hat. One day, when out in the Bois de Boulogne with Valon, they met Ferdinand Bischoffsheim and his American wife. She criticised Valon for making his lady friend ride such a plain horse and, a few days later, gave her as a present "Sentinelle", a fine horse she had bought for 5000 francs. After that, when Charlotte went riding in the Bois de Boulogne, people noticed her: according to her, Valon's friends "looked at the lady on top, but mostly at the horse".

Charlotte Dufrène was born in Paris on 1 November 1880, and was thus only three years younger than Raymond Roussel. She was thirty when she became his mistress. She said that she chose a pseudonym because she came from a bourgeois family; her parents were extremely Catholic, and she had been educated in a convent boarding-school in Bezons. She believed in God, as opposed to Roussel who did not. Michel Leiris remembered how, when they took refuge in Biarritz in 1914, he and his brother Pierre profoundly shocked her by suggesting going to a service at the synagogue.

In reality, Charlotte was the daughter of a policeman, Charles Frédez, and Alphonsine-Mélanie Acard, dwelling at 87, Rue Monceau, an apartment block near Rue du Rocher; the marriage witnesses had been two neighbouring concierges from Rue d'Anjou. Charlotte was her middle name, her first was Marie, and her assumed name was a near anagram of her surname: FRÉDEZ = D(U)FRÈ(NE). But was it premeditated, and chosen by Roussel as she claimed, or did she choose it herself? And what name had she used when she was the Comte de Valon's mistress?

What is less well known is that Roussel had already had another mistress ("when he was about twenty," Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris, which takes us back to the years 1897-8). Was it for that reason that he had rented the bachelor flat at 14, Rue Marignan? All that we know is that she abruptly broke off with him, and demanded that Mme Roussel pay her 100,000 francs for having to put up with her son's reading his tedious poetry to her every day!

"You will have everything you desire," Roussel told Charlotte, "so long as you never ask any questions." He moved his new mistress into a flat, near Rue de Chaillot, at 47, Rue Pierre-Charron. In order that she would look the part, he paid her a large monthly endowment. Of course, she had a maid. Yet she had to lead such



Raymond Roussel and Charlotte Dufrène, c. 1912.

an extravagant life style — Roussel made her wear each pair of white kid-skin gloves only once — that she never had the chance to save any money for her old age; nor did this really occur to her, she just took whatever Roussel gave her, and asked him for more when necessary. When he visited his mother, he took Charlotte with him, but she remained in the car, parked outside the door. She never visited his house after his mother's death. On the other hand, to her flat he invited the people he did not want to allow to come too near him. And it would seem that Charlotte Dufrène was permitted to visit the villa in Biarritz only once: this was during the 1914-18 war, during a charity evening for a reading of the first act of *L'Aiglon*, with Maurice Rostand in the role of the Duc de Reichstadt. She paid for her ticket.

Raymond Roussel called by every evening to pick her up to go to a show. At the Opéra, while he had a box where only a legitimate wife would be permitted, she took a "balcony" seat (behind the orchestra and slightly higher up), where kept women were tolerated.

Did he ever treat her badly? Roussel had changing moods. At times he would take her to the Bois de Boulogne in the car to sit on a bench and eat cakes. On another occasion, in the course of a journey, no matter how much she complained of being thirsty, he refused to stop the car before they arrived. He then ordered twelve glasses of beer and, turning towards her, said: "There, my dear, now you can quench your thirst." In his letters, he was extremely tender, calling her "my little Charlotte", and he trusted her more than he did anybody else. When she wore a new outfit in his car, he squashed himself up into the corner, for fear of creasing it, and he was extremely proud of the effect she caused when entering the theatre, gallantly pointing out to her how much she was admired.

If we judge her by the series of photos taken of her and Raymond Roussel by Otto (then at 15, Rue Royale), Charlotte Dufrène was elegant and pretty, although she thought herself a little too fat. She did indeed seem to have something of an "*embonpoint*", as the beauty canon of the day preferred it, and her chubby cheeks were slightly flattened out in the touching up of the photographs. She still remembered fifty years later that on that day she wore a red dress and a white hat. Her eyes were extremely soft, "the colour known as 'hazel', I believe" (Michel Leiris), and she had a charming smile; her blonde hair had given her the family nickname of "golden helmet", a reference to the heroine of a well-known news story of the time.

For twenty-three years, the relationship between the two "lovers" remained platonic. Did Charlotte Dufrène suffer as a result? Did she end up loving the man she called, in front of Michel Leiris, "Monsieur Roussel"? She spoke about him enthusiastically, saying how sure he had been of his own genius, while admitting that she had never understood a word of what he had written. She remembered his gifts as a pianist and singer and that, during a performance of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, he had followed the entire opera in the score, without ever looking up at the stage.

She sometimes travelled with him, but he never permitted her to go with him to the Côte d'Azur, so as to keep intact the memory of the happy moments he had spent there with his mother. Nor to Amiens, though he never explained why; we may suppose that it was because of his meeting with Jules Verne... or was it his military service?

Michel Leiris noted: "As for the Côte d'Azur, Charlotte D. said that she has always gone there alone, when she needed 'a little cure of *trente-et-quarante*, roulette and *chemin de fer*'; she becomes extremely animated when speaking of how she adores gambling — the emotion one feels when turning over a card — and how she would play anything, even dominoes."

OBSESSIVE CLEANLINESS

It is thanks to Charlotte that we know a few intimate details of Roussel's life. He had a real phobia of dirt, no doubt inherited from his mother who lived in fear of sickness and death. When he went out in the evening, he spent two hours washing, but never wore scent. He loved scents, but never used any. "Before the 1914-18 war, his rule was to wear his collars just once (for he had a horror of washed articles), his shirts only a few times, a suit, an overcoat, a hat or braces fifteen times, a tie three times; when he dressed in entirely new clothes, he said: 'I'm walking on air... Everything's new today'."*

He had a small square of white cloth sewn on to the lapels of his suits, on which he could make a mark each time he wore them.

We have further proof of this obsession with cleanliness from the large quantity of handkerchiefs he sent to the laundry of the Ritz when staying there in 1928: an average of five to six handkerchiefs a day, which he sent to be washed in batches of twenty to twenty-five every five or six days.

He then made a present of the clothes he no longer wore to his servants; it is even said (but is it true?) that his valet ended up buying socks that were his own size and that Roussel was so absent-minded he did not notice they were too big for him.

He was not eccentric, but truly elegant, simple and refined. His hat always matched his gaiters. Juliette Jannet remembered him visiting Viroflay in a magnificent white suit.

He kept faithful to his tradesmen: in Paris, to Cavanagh, his Irish tailor at 26, Champs-Élysées, in London, to C.F. Johns & Pegg, 2 Clifford Street, off Bond Street (in 1932, Mr Pegg was still informing him of his annual trip to Paris); to his shirt-maker, "Au Carnaval de Venise"; Pinaud et Amour, his hatter at 89, Rue de Richelieu; his cobbler, Hellstern, on Place Vendôme; his jeweller was Boucheron (26, Place Vendôme); he bought his silverware at Kindal, the Swedish cutlery shop

* Michel Leiris, *Roussel l'Ingénu*.

on Avenue de l'Opéra, and his English goods from Leuchars and Son, 2, Rue de la Paix. His bookshop and stationer's was Brentano's, Avenue de l'Opéra; his bookbinder, Gruel, 418, Rue Saint-Honoré, just a short step from Rue Royale.

ROUSSEL AT THE THEATRE

If Raymond Roussel took an "official" mistress, then this was to allow him to go out; a man could not go to a show alone, but had to be accompanied. Thus, all of the people who knew Charlotte Dufrène at this time met her at the theatre. As Roussel particularly disliked arriving late, he would have himself driven there early, then send his chauffeur to fetch his mistress from Rue Pierre-Charron, to be sure that she would be there with him before the curtain came up. He would also frequently pay for seats in neighbouring boxes so as to be more isolated, and not have to put up with the closeness and chatter of others.

Madame Roussel's diaries make it clear that, before having a mistress, Raymond Roussel would go to the theatre with her, along with his sister Germaine and her husband, Louis and Ninette Ganderax, Monsieur Magnan, Madame Henriette Cassellari, Rose Caron, or any of the other friends she would allow to use the boxes she rented all year at the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Français.

Michel Leiris confirmed that Roussel adored the theatre, "above all the plays by Victorien Sardou* (and, in general, historical plays), melodramas (especially *La Bouquetière des Innocents*, which he saw twelve or fifteen times in a row, or *La Tour de Nesle*), operettas at the Trianon-Lyrique, Georges Feydeau's plays and saucy music hall. He hated psychological dramas, the 'theatre of ideas', especially the work of Henry Bataille, which he called 'bombast'. He also detested plays full of witticisms, those of Sacha Guitry, for example, and claimed to enjoy only plays 'with complex plots':

I love a large number of compact plays
With, in the prologue, a crowd of folk, which
We then see, fifteen minutes later, rich
And lazy from their crimes...†

* It is from Victorien Sardou's *Théodora*, with music by Massenet (1884, but revived in 1902), that Roussel borrowed the character of Chrysomallo and his horse Barsymès in *Locus Solus*. Roussel also confided in André Gide that his theatre classics were Émile Augier, Victorien Sardou, and Alexandre Dumas *filis*.

† *The Nuptials*.

As he enjoyed children's shows, Roussel was not above going to the puppet theatre on the Champs-Élysées, and regularly attended performances at the Théâtre du Petit-Monde. Since he and Charlotte Dufrène were the only adults there unaccompanied by children, he finally begged her to bring along a little girl she knew; thanks to her, Roussel could join in with the quizzes during the show, and was delighted when she won a toy as a result of an answer he had whispered in her ear.

According to his nephew, Michel Ney: "He was very much like a child. He loved old operettas, and would see the same operetta five times in a row... He loved that.

He didn't like the modern plays of the time... All he liked was old operettas... So, he loved operettas... Operettas!... and he would go five times in a row, evening after evening after evening..."

Roger Vitrac noted, in 1928: "I heard that Raymond Roussel attended the performance of *Le Bossu* every evening when it was on at the Porte Saint-Martin. When I asked why, I was not surprised to hear that, far from being interested in the play, he was busy observing differences in the performances; checking the order of appearances of walk-on parts, watching the actors' gestures, their intonations, how the set was laid out, the way the curtain was brought in, everything in fact that took place beyond the limit of what the author had indicated, everything that was on the margins, floating, that was not marked by that definitive frame which characterises the final version of a motion picture."

As he often attended the matinée and then the evening performance, Roussel would spend the end of the afternoon in his box, alone in the darkness of the theatre, so as not to break the spell. One day, Philippe Clément met him at the hundredth performance of a variety play, where he had front seats with Charlotte Dufrène; he naïvely said how surprised he was to see him there. "But," said Roussel, "I come here every day! I've seen this show a hundred times... You cannot imagine how fascinating it is to observe the minute differences in the actors' performances..."

Again Dr Janet noted, concerning his "regulomania": "He could not see a play in a front seat, if he had already seen it from a box."

In some theatres, it was the fashion to take a photograph from the stage of the audience at the beginning of the performance. This souvenir photo was then rapidly developed and sold during the interval. In this way, Roussel bought two photographs taken before performances of *Prise*, a comedy by André Pascal and Albert-Jean, at the Théâtre de l'Avenue, during the 1929 summer season. As these photos prove, Raymond Roussel and Charlotte Dufrène, who were of course dressed quite differently on each occasion, occupied the same box for both performances.

It was to this passion for the theatre, which Roussel acquired young, that we must attribute the strange atmospheres which drew his imagination: "The old decorations of casinos, scenes like the ones painted on organs, the fairground booths set up in prisons, the decapitator, the Musée Dupuytren. New objects appear only as fabulous appliances".* In Jean Ferry's opinion: "As for stage scenes, scenes on stage, reconstructions of scenes, scenes of reconstructions of scenes on stage, this was his real work. *Impressions d'Afrique* is simply one long performance, *La Doublure*, the dubious story of an actor, *Chiquenaude*, the story of a pantomime. [...] Everywhere we find wings, wigs, costumes (the negro king as Margarita in *Faust!*), sets, real characters living among false ones who are sometimes dead, clouds of smoke, phenomena, paper cut-ups, trickery, in fact an entire illusionist's cabinet in all of its

* Jean Cocteau, *Opium*.

icy horror.” In Act II of *The Seine*, Jeanne complains that everything is false in the theatre; and, of course, she does so on stage:

In a show

All is false; there is not one single fact;
We see a man's whiskers grow from one act
To the next. All is possible. They rig
The boards as they do the players. A wig
Once removed is like a change in the cast,
And when a brave huntsman sounds a horn blast
We need not be an expert in such things
To work out that the horn is in the wings,
Whose fanfare we can hear, whereas the one
The huntsman holds, glittering like the sun,
Is there to dazzle you and is pure show.

And all of the third act of *Les Noces* takes place in a theatre (*L'Ambigu*, in an abandoned version).

All Raymond Roussel had to do now was to become a dramatist himself. Concerning *Impressions d'Afrique*, he revealed that Edmond Rostand had told him: “Your book could be dramatised to great effect.” And Roussel acknowledged with a hint of modesty: “His words influenced me.”

Thus, it was thanks to Edmond Rostand, the celebrated author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *L'Aiglon* and *Chanteclerc*, that there were dramatised versions of *Impressions d'Afrique* and, later, of *Locus Solus*, but also *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*. “What is more, I suffered from being misunderstood and thought that I might be able to reach the public more easily with a play than with a book.” Roussel was not wrong: at the time, the theatre was much discussed in the press. It took up entire pages in the newspapers. Weeklies and illustrated monthly reviews wrote about stage shows, all of them, whether they were successful or not. Since 15 December 1908, they even had their daily paper, *Comœdia*. Such an abundant press must of course fill its columns; this need for copy may in part explain the large number of articles written about Raymond Roussel's plays, which were performed for only a few nights. At that time, Roussel's work could still cause a scandal!

Even though his wealth, or rather that of his mother, had already allowed him to pay the Librairie Lemerre to publish *La Doublure*, *Chiquenaude*, *La Vue* and *Impressions d'Afrique*, some considered Roussel to be a dramatist; this is not entirely wrong when you consider that two of his novels were adapted to the stage and that he wrote two other plays directly for the theatre. In the end, it was from the theatre that he was awaiting that “glory” which his novels and poems had not given him.

Indeed it does seem that, if Roussel adapted *Impressions d'Afrique*, this was less from any need to express himself in dramatic form, than from the hope of reaching,

as he said, a wider public. Edmond Rostand's opinion was perhaps sincere, but it does seem rather surprising when we remember that Roussel's novel contains not one line of dialogue... but what does that matter! Furthermore, Roussel no doubt considered that he was making a major concession to the audience by adapting only the second part — the one he recommended new readers to tackle first.

The typescript of this version in five acts is preceded by one of Roussel's characteristic notes:

Nota bene. When reading this play, it is essential to have to hand the novel from which it is adapted for, during each act, numerous references are made to the book for various details of the stage direction.

Which hardly facilitates the reading of a play in which all the characters introduce themselves by means of long monologues. Soreau's speech alone, when presenting the tableaux, covers eight densely typewritten pages!

However, in this African extravaganza, Roussel endeavoured to introduce a little realism: the blacks speak an "indigenous language", with the dialogues of Talu and Yaour, for example, being interpreted by Sirdah for the sake of the Europeans. It is in this language "completely inaccessible to European ears" that *The Jeruká* is written and sung on stage. The tune of the first verse, "of a bizarre rhythm and tonality, is composed of a single theme which is repeated indefinitely". In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Roussel would specify that the music of this epic saga sung by Talu's *bands* "consisted of continuous *repetitions* of a short figure":

The black warriors:

*Das Kaéner ti doméré
Loka lurnipéis dojenn
Gopa iar élijez tohur
Né déléjaz tenn maï dremm*

*Sil toé dùh phrô cartáé
Nah rémor thô rej fak téer
Dess korufa naor paé
Thuz épâshi fênek róil (etc.)*

Carmichael adds the following couplets in a falsetto:

*Nah pordéo réez tâhi;
Fur frocéhenn gâtt molé drôh
Apir néju tiz néridu
Goudehla phrô éritenn (etc.)*

Work on adapting the novel went quickly: by the beginning of 1911, it was finished.



THE TRIP TO INDIA

And this was the moment Roussel's mother chose for her well-known trip to India, or rather to Ceylon. As has been claimed, she did indeed take her coffin with her, and the agency that arranged the trip wrote to her on this subject:

We have the pleasure [!] to inform you [...] that Nord-Deutscher Lloyd, of Bremen, has advised us that it would be possible, in the event of death, to proceed with embalming the body which would then be placed in the coffin Madame Roussel brought with her for this purpose.

She accepted the estimate of 345,510 francs, but insisted that her bunk be widened by 1.2 m; the cost of this modification was 500 francs.

Seven people were to take ship — presumably the same ones who usually went with Mme Roussel to Carlsbad: her lady's companion, Dr Mattin, who had already travelled to Egypt with Raymond Roussel in 1906, her cook and chambermaid, her son Raymond and his valet — on 3 January 1911, at Genoa, on the steamship *Barbarossa*, the return being on the *Bülöw*. As a special dispensation, the superior-officers' quarters, containing the best luxury cabins, with

private sitting-rooms, bathrooms, etc., were put at Mme Roussel's disposal.

After passing through a storm off Messina during the night of 6-7 January, the steamship left the Red Sea on the 11th and reached Colombo on the 27th. The travellers visited Kandy and the Dalada Maligawa temple, where Buddhist pilgrims come to worship the Tooth. Madame Roussel must have stayed for two weeks in Ceylon, because she was back in Marseilles on 4 March, presumably after a short stay in India (unless she really refused to set foot there?), since she notes in her diary for 8 April:

Pearl necklace Bombay
13,975, of which 600 F paid
pearls 12,000.

In the photographs of this trip she looks extremely tired. Marguerite Roussel had always suffered from "stomach pains", which may have justified her frequent stays in Carlsbad. She returned ill from her trip to Ceylon and wrote that she had contracted

shivering fits. "Rub-downs take it out of me, perspiration as soon as I fall asleep, atrocious fainting fits, tears on waking up. Neighbours awful." A visit from Professor Dieulafoy and the presence of Dr Clément reassured her for a while, but she began taking Veronal. None the less, she went to Carlsbad for a month in July, as usual.

IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE AT THE THÉÂTRE FÉMINA

As for Raymond Roussel, no sooner was he back from the Indies than he set to work on getting his adaptation of *Impressions d'Afrique* staged. On 2 April 1911, he signed a contract with Émile Duard, which stipulated:

The following points have been agreed: M. Raymond Roussel has employed M. Duard, who has accepted, to act in a play the first night of which will be between 20 June 1911 and 10 July, in Paris. There will be fifteen rehearsals of this play and three performances.

In fact, the first public performance would take place only on 30 September; but a private performance may have preceded this for, two days earlier on 28 September, Roussel wrote on Émile Duard's copy of *Impressions d'Afrique*: "friendly recollections and thanks for his admirable creation of the role of 'Juillard'"... In contrast to those playwrights who, on the first night, cautiously conceal themselves at the back of the theatre, Raymond Roussel had his chair set in the centre of the rows for his first public performance, and received his guests there.

Roussel chose the relatively new Théâtre Fémina, situated downstairs at 90, Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and run by Lucien Richemond, "an intelligent impresario" according to Raymond Stoulig. "The Théâtre Fémina is Paris's most attractive address. It can be hired for private performances, society evenings, balls." (*Almanach Hachette*). It was on this stage that *Impressions d'Afrique* was performed in public for the first time on Saturday, 30 September 1911.

Robert de Montesquiou* reckoned that there could have been no more than two performances, and Duard's contract was for three; in fact, there were sixteen, from 30 September to 15 October. On 24 August, Raymond Roussel had made an advance payment of 6000 francs for the hire of the theatre, followed by at least another nine payments between 19 September and 17 October. The performances of *Impressions d'Afrique* cost its author at least 60,350 francs, of which the actors were paid about 25,000 francs.

It seems that there were three successive versions of the play: the role of Juillard, which has been published,† probably belongs to the first version, because it covers only two acts, while the programme talks of four. Theatregoers who bought the programme were in for a surprise: the title-page informed them that it was a play

* In *Élus et Appelés*.

† *Épaves*, 1972.

"by M. RAYMOND RAISSSEL adapted by the author from his novel". The same wording appears inside the programme. We might wonder for a moment if Roussel had not chosen a pseudonym, if the programme were not full of printing errors ("Carinichael" for "Carmichaël") and if we did not know that the "author" of the "novel" was definitely Roussel and not Raissel.* What is more, this programme was soon replaced, or corrected, by a simple card, printed on one side, giving the proper spellings. But it is easy to imagine what the author went through!

This programme also indicates a few changes in the cast list: the role of Adinolfia was played by Mme Franquet; that of Bex by Thomen; and that of Jenn by Herté. Three parts had been scrapped: Skariofszky, Seil Kor and Nair.

The play was divided into four acts, indicated as follows: first act — "Somewhere in Equatorial Africa"; second act — "A district of Ejur"; third act — "Behuliphruen"; fourth act — "Trophies Square".

Music was by Willy Redstone; choreography was by Mme Dayses Papurello; sets were by Fourney and Deshays; the orchestra conducted by M. Rémond.

The second programme adds: costumes made by Granier; wigs by J.A. Pontet; shoes by Galvin.

Cast	
<i>Adinolfia</i>	Mmes Léonie Yahne
<i>Louise Montalescot</i>	Carmen de Raisy
<i>Olga</i>	Renée Bussy
<i>Sirdah</i>	Yvette Mina
<i>Jizme</i>	Myriah
<i>Talu</i>	MM. Marquet
<i>Dodor</i>	Andreyor
<i>Juillard</i>	Duard
<i>Baïa</i>	Henry Davin
<i>Yaour</i>	Devarennnes
<i>Bex</i>	Saint-Isles
<i>Chénevillot</i>	Sémery
<i>Skariofszky</i>	Le Prieur
<i>Carinichael</i> [<i>sic</i>]	Pastou [or <i>Paston</i>]
<i>Bedu</i>	Guirec
<i>Seil Kor</i>	R. Lyon
<i>Sorcau</i>	Chabrol
<i>Jenn</i>	Fabry
<i>Norbert</i>	Evrard
<i>Nair</i>	Dialo [and not <i>Diallo</i>]
<i>A Chef</i>	Priolet
<i>Negroes, Negresses, Children, Sailors, Dancers, etc.</i>	

The play closely follows the novel, but Roussel did make a few changes. For example the *crachat à delta* (hence the Order of the Delta in the novel, which Roussel takes the trouble of explaining in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*) became *crachat à bêta*, another pun on a letter of the Greek alphabet [*bêta* also means "stupid"]; perhaps he thought it more appropriate to his audience?

* This typo can be found only in the programme, not in the press.

All writers carry the burden of a particular play, book, title or line. The public, and even more so critics, loves this sort of signpost, which puts a label on an author and once and for all “brands” him. Like Roussel himself, critics hate change. And all the better if there is a scandal! For Baudelaire, this was for many years *Une Charogne*; for Alfred Jarry, it is still *Ubu Roi*, and for Raymond Queneau, *Zazie*, with their respective “*mcrdre*” and “my arse”. For Raymond Roussel it is the “rails of veal lights”. From the first performance of *Impressions d’Afrique* until his death, for critics and gossip columnists Roussel was to be “the inventor of the rails of veal lights”. Even today, it is all the so-called “cultivated” French public knows of his work.

But should Roussel really be reduced to this novel sort of metaphor, thrown up by his famous “procedure”? Why did the (rare) spectators of the play and the (equally rare) readers of the novel not understand it? Since a *baleine* [“whale”] emerging from the sea is reminiscent of an *îlot* [“small island”], then what could be more natural than to make a statue of an *ilote* [“helot”] out of a whalebone corset; if it rolls on *rails* [“rails”] of *mou de veau* [“veal lights”], then this is because one generally *raille* [“pokes fun at”] someone who is *mou* [“spineless”]; finally, the plinth of the statue is inscribed with the *duel* [“dual number”] of a Greek verb connected to an *accolade* [“bracket”] even as the protagonists of a *duel* [“duel”] are reconciled by an *accolade* [“embrace”]? There is nothing surprising in any of that for a moderately logical mind. The spectators in 1911 failed to understand that they were watching a “charade”, of the sort they would perform in their *salons*, and that the object presented on stage (the statue on rails) was meant to be deciphered. “Since 1910, I have heard people laugh about the ‘rails of veal lights’ in *Impressions of Africa*. How can you expect the fear of provoking laughter not to affect Roussel?”* It is even possible that Roussel was highly pleased by the constant allusions to a simple example of his procedure that could be understood by one and all. He certainly preferred being the “inventor of rails of veal lights” to remaining totally unknown! Unfortunately, those rails are now part of the Rousselian legend, and it is this false image of his work that was to be remembered for a long time: André Rivoire† mentioned the invention of “a train made of corset whalebones set rolling on rails of veal lights”; Saturnin Fabre‡ thought that these infamous rails must evoke “the softness of the seats in first-class carriages”; Bernard Lelou, in *Paris-Midi* in 1933, remembered “railway tracks made of veal lights being mourned by weeping cows”; and so on.

There were few mentions in the press, apart from a photograph in *Le Figaro* with the following caption: “One of the scenes most applauded: the earthworm playing a cithara.” At the time, nobody took offence at this sort of publicity paid for by the author. Robert de Montesquiou tried to explain the failure of the stage adaptation of *Impressions d’Afrique*. In his opinion, Roussel had, like certain English writers:

an almost algebraic passion for setting equations of apparently unsolvable facts, and then

* Jeha Cocteau, *Opium*.

† *Le Temps*, 18 December 1922.

‡ *Douche écossaise*.



Roussel with his mother and a friend, Biarritz, 1911.

unwrapping them with a fluent verisimilitude which leaves no room for argument, his speciality being to throw risky pirouettes in the air, then either to bring them gracefully down to earth, or else have them fall into the safety net which he has prudently placed beneath them to avoid fatal accidents. I neither protest nor object to any of this, and am actually full of agreement. But I must admit that what I do not understand, since that would imply a naïveté in the Author which is totally incompatible with the ironic wit in his tale, is when I hear that he has dramatised his extraordinary scenario and had it performed on stage with great pomp and circumstance, a luxurious proliferation of posters and the obvious desire to see it succeed.

I reject the solutions of none of the impossibilities he presents and finally resolves; but this is one that I defy him to explain [...]: to imagine that he could attract the curiosity of faithful spectators of M. Prévost or of *Le Cœur dispose** towards such productions is such an ingenuous misunderstanding that, of all M. Roussel's marvels, charms and tricks, this is the only one I object to; I remain stubbornly uncomprehending and defy him to explain himself.†

MARGUERITE ROUSSEL DIES IN BIARRITZ

However, Raymond Roussel could not devote all of his time to his play; he also had to look after his mother who was seriously ill. It is well known that, in normal circumstances, Raymond and his mother were seldom apart and constantly wrote to each other. In the year 1902 alone, between 13 March and 3 May, Marguerite Roussel wrote twenty-two letters and six

telegrams from Nice to her son, who in turn wrote twenty-one letters, four wires and a postcard. From 31 July to 24 August, she was in Carlsbad, from where she sent him eleven letters, two postcards and a telegram; Raymond punctually replied to her, with the same number of letters and postcards as well as a telegram. In Biarritz, from 10 September to 1 November, Marguerite posted fifteen letters and nine postcards to Raymond, who answered with thirteen letters, twenty-six postcards and two wires. Can a mother and her twenty-five-year-old son be any closer in each other's thoughts?

Yet in 1911, Marguerite Roussel could not even attend the first night of her son's play. In July, she was anxious to know if everything would be ready in time in Biarritz, including an experimental central-heating system. We know only that Raymond Roussel was at the time in Carlsbad with her at the Hôtel Pupp, where

* Comedy by Francis de Croisset which opened on 21 February 1912 at the Athénée.

† Robert de Montesquiou, *Élus et Appelés*.

Rostand sent him a telegram on 6 August:

I was deeply touched my dear friend by your letter and I hope that you will come to Biarritz for a while after all.
Yours, Ed. Rostand.

Had Roussel written to Edmond Rostand because, having followed his advice about dramatising *Impressions d'Afrique* and being taken up with rehearsals, he was unable to go to Biarritz that year? Madame Roussel had presumably returned to Paris as usual when she noted in her diary on 16 August: "Dieulafoy dead", followed by a large cross covering the rest of the page. She wrote nothing more in her last diary except these words on 28 August: "Dentist 4 o'clock". She was certainly in her villa in Biarritz at the end of September, and her last caprice was to send one of her servants to London to buy some of those lap-dogs she so adored. On 1 October (a Sunday), Raymond wrote to her from Paris:

Lamouroux will leave for London on Sunday [presumably the same day]; there was no point in his leaving beforehand, since the shops in London are closed from Saturday noon to Monday morning. He will then go straight back to Biarritz and will stop in Paris only if he considers it necessary to give the dogs a rest, since they may not bear making such a long journey without a break. In any case, he will keep you directly informed. It has been agreed that he will bring you the two bitches, one with her three pups.

As has already been indicated, Madame Roussel had always been besotted with lap-dogs, King Charles spaniels, bull terriers and so on, some of which, such as the one Raymond Roussel can be seen leaning over in a photograph, look more like rats than ratters. One of the last photographs of Madame Roussel, and certainly the last with her son, who had postcards made of it, shows her sitting beside an occasional table with two of these knick-knacks on it. She seems to have temporarily passed on this taste for miniature dogs to her daughter Germaine; but "Boboche", the "pooch" that can be seen in boyhood photos of Michel Nèy, was a monster in comparison with Marguerite Roussel's dogs!

Yet she can scarcely have had time to stroke the dogs Lamouroux brought from London, for she died during the night of 5-6 October 1911. She was sixty-four.





* This huge and charmless five-floor villa still stands beside the salt-water cure hostel that occupies Mme Roussel's former garden; its exterior does not seem to have been modified much. After having been bequeathed to Germaine Roussel's husband Charles Ney, the Duc d'Elchingen, and Raymond Roussel, it was sold in July 1917 to Ramon de la Sota, a ship-owner from Bilbao, who gave it the name it still has, "Villa Begoña", before reselling it in 1926 to Alfred Loewenstein, a Belgian financier.

† Xavier de Hautecloque, "*Les morts mystérieuses*", *Le Crapouillot*, March 1933, concerning the death of Loewenstein.

‡ The first of these paintings by Hubert Robert (1733-1808), *The Spring at Vesta's Temple* (2.45 m x 1.20 m) can be identified in a photograph and in the catalogue of the Roussel sale ("Old paintings, no. 21, p.37); its neighbour, *Rest in the Park*, has the same dimensions.

Nor did she have time to enjoy the comfort of the "Villa Chaslon-Roussel",* which she had had built on a plot of land of 4000 square metres, purchased in 1907 on the sea-front by the Miramar beach, on Rue des Vagues. In 1909, she accepted the plans drawn up by Walter André Destailleur, a Parisian architect (whose name is spelt "W.A. D'Estailleur" on the façade), but went on making modifications, especially a long ugly outside staircase with a cast-iron banister, which has rusted in the rain, running down directly from the third-floor balcony to the side garden, which has now been built over; "that villa, which had baths for dogs", noted Michel Leiris in his *Journal*, but where the bathroom adjacent to Madame Roussel's bedroom was one of those last-minute corbelling adjustments which finally delayed completion of the villa for two years. It had cost her almost four million francs.

For luxury and comfort, no expense was spared. "A magical palace. In the middle, an immense hall. Around the hall, galleries leading to apartments."† According to Michel Leiris: "The massive vaulted entrance to the villa was reminiscent of the fantastical entrance to a grotto." On the ground floor opening on to Rue des Vagues, the doorway was sheltered by a porch with two pillars, supporting a first-floor balcony. On this ground floor, which corresponds to the third floor facing the sea, after crossing the vestibule and the hall, containing the main staircase (and a lift), you reach the main sitting-room measuring over one hundred square metres with large bay windows looking out over sunsets across the Atlantic, and a large balcony. Then, to the right, is a dining-room of over fifty square metres with a fireplace, on the mantelpiece of which stood a precious Chinese vase, and which was flanked by two large paintings by Hubert Robert,‡

without any concern for the ill effects of the sea air on the Basque coast; to the left, is a small sitting-room. The dumb-waiter in the pantry was linked to the kitchens — situated in an adjacent building to avoid any unpleasant smells — by means of a miniature underground railway!

It was Biarritz where the Roussel family were near the Rostands, who lived in the Villa Arnaga in Cambo. In his *Confessions d'un demi-siècle*, Maurice Rostand evoked the international life of Biarritz “where King Edward VII came with the same free and easy manner as if he had been the Prince of Wales spending a month at the Palace Hotel”. Other visiting monarchs included Alphonse XIII, king of Spain, who came up from San Sebastian; King Léopold of Belgium, who visited Baronne de Vaughan; and Queen Natalie of Serbia, with her carriage pulled by mules from her Castel-Biarritz.

“Dinners were organised in hotels all round the town. There were balls in the villas.” There, one could meet Yussupov, “a tall, fair-haired man, dressed by an English tailor, who had not yet killed Rasputin”; Princess Yuriewsky, the morganatic widow of Czar Alexander II, who had been assassinated in 1881; “Princess Bariatinsky who, in fits of rage, stuck hat-pins in her servants’ heads; whose husband, riddled with debts, dyed his naturally brown hair with hydrogen peroxide, so that the bailiffs could not make them sell”; such a large Russian colony that an Orthodox church was built on Avenue de l’Impératrice in 1893; not forgetting “Mesdames de Penalver and de Balaños, their faces coated with the same glaze, so that they dared not smile”; plus a host of princes, honeymooners, eccentrics and fashionable people. The *demi-monde* was represented by, among others, Eva de Bravante, in her Villa Lohengrin, situated near the Plateau du Phare; otherwise the Villa Belza, stuck up on a rocky point between the Basque coast and the old port, was a known place of ill-repute. “There was that Miremont patisserie with, at five o’clock, fewer cakes than queens and fewer babas than grand dukes, that ‘Royalty’ with its idlers sporting buttonholes, drinking beverages with English names; that beach at dusk where, the lights all out, one went for a drive or a stroll, as at the Acacias, calling out to one another, talking to everybody because one knew everybody.”* The elegant Madame de Cartassac could still be seen, whom photographic postcards show on the promenade of the main beach, in front of the casino in March 1909, in the company of Germaine Roussel, the Duchesse d’Elchingen; the Marchioness Ailesbury, known as “Milady” in Marbella, her Moorish villa; the Marquis d’Arcangues; the Comte de la Rochefoucauld; Baron Cottu, who trained a cow for a horse show, and so on. But Raymond Roussel, who used to wear a Basque beret at the time, also met there the aeronaut Alberto Santos-Dumont, who was his neighbour in Neuilly, and Pierre Loti, the commander of the Bidassoa naval station.

Michel Ney, Raymond Roussel’s nephew, played on the beach with his cousins the Grimprels, but also with Pierre, Paul and Caroline Murat, Niki de Gunsbourg,

* Maurice Rostand, *Confessions d'un demi-siècle*.

Baudouin de Jonghe and his sisters Yseult and Thilda, Louis de Langlade, nicknamed "Louli", Max and Hélène Fould and Simone Stern, who were all to meet up again in Biarritz in 1914 with their mothers, who had become nurses for the duration of hostilities. In 1901, Georges, Raymond Roussel's older brother, had died of what was probably intestinal tuberculosis; their mother, who had always complained of "stomach pains", seems to have suffered from bleeding (?) after coming back from India — it is certain that she suffered terribly from pains in her intestines, but it is impossible to confirm if it was cancer. Although she had scarcely shown any previous signs of being devout, her diaries for 1911 are full of prayers to God and to the Virgin; however, we do not know if she was receiving the holy sacraments. Her death, announced by Philippe Renouat, her valet, and Antoine Bardet, her "mechanic", occurred on 6 October 1911 at "thirty minutes in the morning".

Her children had her embalmed, and Raymond Roussel had a small window put into the lid of her coffin so as to be able to look at her face up until the last minute. The funeral took place on Wednesday 11 October 1911 at ten o'clock in the morning at her parish church, Saint-Pierre-de-Chailot, in the presence of many friends: politicians (Georges Clemenceau), composers, singers (Rose Caron), actors (Jeanne Granier), bankers and financiers (Fould, Rothschild), the royal family (Prince Murat), generals, the Italian ambassador, etc. She was buried in the family vault in the old Neuilly cemetery, where she had already brought together her loved ones. Paul Bourget, who had written on 10 May from Hyères, where he was staying, to send Raymond Roussel "my wishes for the complete recovery of your mother", wrote a long letter of condolence.

A RICH BACHELOR IDLER

Raymond Roussel took over in his own name the plot in the cemetery of Neuilly where nobody, not even he, would now join his mother. He was a bachelor, and alone. All he had left were his sister Germaine, and above all Charlotte Dufrène. Without her, would he really have been able to bear his solitude? Now that their mother had gone, he lived in Neuilly, and his sister on Rue de Chailot. But nothing was to change. He kept his mother's car as long as possible, not because he liked vintage vehicles as was thought, but out of loyalty. It was a saloon that had been specially designed by Charron-Girardot, with two facing back-seats; Madame Roussel detested having the wind in her face and would travel with her back towards the direction being taken. Antoine Bardet, the chauffeur, transferred his services to Roussel, who each week gave him long and detailed lists of purchases.*

The shutters of the Neuilly villa were closed, and they would stay that way. Raymond Roussel gave a detailed plan to Miss MacLelan, the Scottish housekeeper

* Michel Leiris noted somewhere, but without it being possible to say if he was referring to the same car, that "the Roussels' 40 HP [was] adjusted so as not to go over 40 or 50 kph.(?)"; the (?) is Leiris's.

who directed the other servants,* on which the exact position of each object on every piece of furniture was indicated: nothing was to be moved, everything was to stay exactly as his mother had left it.

Raymond Roussel was to become as spendthrift as she had been. Between July and December 1911, he went eleven times to Kendall, on Rue de la Paix, where he bought a hoard of silver or silver-gilt items (sewing-kits, cigarette cases, carriage clocks, etc.), having some of them engraved with the initials of the people for whom they were intended: "R.B." (his nephew, Robert de Breteuil), or "C.D." (Charlotte Dufrène) on a silver-gilt powder-box.

His reputation for being a rich bachelor idler was now firmly established, and he was starting to get seriously "sponged off" by unknowns who wrote to him. For example, Henri Barbusse, who had not yet become an editor for Pierre Lafitte, asked in November 1911 if he knew anyone who might lend him some money. Gullible or not, Roussel obliged with 2000 francs. This was not to be the last of the spongers. The inventor of "Cuirinusable" ["unwear-out-able leather"] was certain that Roussel would be incapable of resisting such a development and was astonished when he did not wish to invest.

All charity is good: on 23 December 1912, Roussel donated 100 francs to the Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare.† But, above all, he took care of all those who had been in the service of his mother, or later of himself. In 1925, he asked Pierre Leiris, his stockbroker, to pay "a second time" her October quarterly payment to Madame Cassellari who had served him since 1911. The Gastebled couple, though we do not know exactly where or when they served, received 3,000 francs per quarter in 1933. In 1929, Raymond Roussel paid fifty francs a month to the widow Aubin, then aged seventy-nine, who used to bring the milk and vegetables from the Muloche farm and who, in the 1900s, served several times in Rue de Chaillot with the cook, M. Précopé, and in the butler's pantry with M. Fred. She faithfully sent her greetings every new year to her old master, and did so one last time for Easter, in April 1933.

While Raymond Roussel was preparing the first night of *Impressions d'Afrique*, he received his call-up papers from the territorial army, with effect as of 1 October 1911.

* Walter, the son of "Mrs Mac", who was later to become the Colombian consul in Spain, used the familiar *tu* with Raymond Roussel and wrote to him from Madrid in June 1914 to say that his mother was delighted with Neuilly, "and so am I to know that she is in your protection in that environment that is so dear to us". Raymond Roussel inscribed a copy of *Impressions d'Afrique* to him with "fond recollections of an old, old comrade", and a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* to his "old pal". As for the correct spelling of the name, he was not very sure himself and wrote either "MacLelan" or "MacLellan".

† A charity which supported women who had been released from Saint-Lazare prison.

III
LOCUS SOLUS
1912-1922

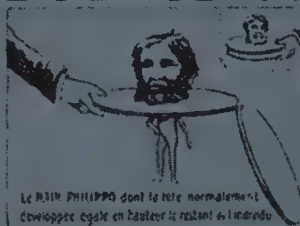
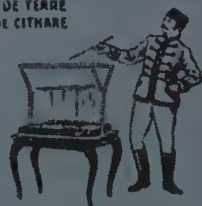


THEATRE ANTOINE — DIRECTION INTERIMAIRE

IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE

SCÈNES PRINCIPALES

LE VER DE TERRE
JOUEUR DE CITARE



LE RIN PHILIPPO dont la tête normalement
développée égale en hauteur le restaurant de l'indro

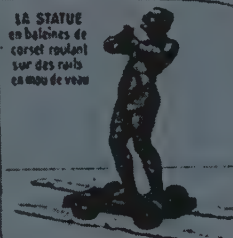


L'unijambiste
LEIGOUALCH
jouant au l'fille
sur son propre l'bia

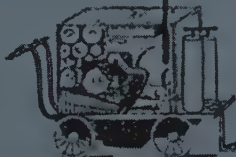
DJIZMÉ volontairement
électrocutée par la foudre



LA STATUE
en balaines de
corset roulant
sur des rails
en bois de vau



L'ORCHESTRE THERMO-MÉCANIQUE
à BEXIUM



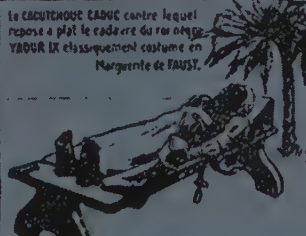
L'HORLOGE à VENT ou PAYS de COCAGNE



LES CHATS
qui jouent aux barres



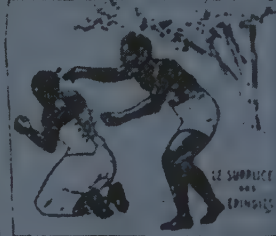
LE MUR DE DOMINOS ÉVOQUEUR de PRÊTRES



Le CACUTEHOUC CADUC contre lequel
repose à plat le cadavre du roi nègre
YBOUR IX élassiquement costume en
Marguerite de FAUST.



LES POITRINES à ÉCHOS des FRÈRES ALCOIT



LE SORLUCER
des
ÉPINGLES

IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE AT THE THÉÂTRE ANTOINE

And now, gentlemen, do you all have your hats on? sorry! I mean your pith helmets? We are about to have the privilege of being loaded, freighted, and carted off: we are about to discover Africa, the Africa of M. Raymond Roussel, the explorer, scientific inventor, fantasist and sadist, an Africa gone topsy-turvy and with electric motors, an Africa of mental transport and so on and so forth! I know: you are already familiar with it. It's back from the Fémina with its first-year stripe — and now looks even younger. At the Théâtre Antoine, these *Impressions d'Afrique* sound like principled wittering, with an air of self-mystification and startling sincerity, but I do not think I shall ask the *why* and the *wherefore* of a shipwreck on the equatorial coast, the final conclusion of which is the announcement of the approach of a whalebone statue on rails of veal lights, the genius of an earthworm on the cithara, the Stoicism of a Breton playing the bagpipes on his tibia, the facility with which four human chests send back a wandering echo, the sight of a cat playing prisoner's base, and Lord knows what else. It is not disagreeable in sum. One gets used to it. And when one has admired the heroism of Dorival made up with boot blacking, one admires him even more for dressing up as a woman and, in the same costume, knocking off another Negro king; it comes as no surprise to spot Carmen de Raisy dedicated to the blue and red of hunters on horseback, learning that her aiguillettes are her breasts and *bronchi* — and the electrocutions and those intercostal points look like child's play. But what are Léonie Yahne, Andreyor, Dutilloy and Duard doing in this mess? Clap, clap!

This article by Ernest La Jeunesse, which was published in *Comœdia illustrée* on 1 June 1912, set the tone: it was how all of Roussel's plays would be received.

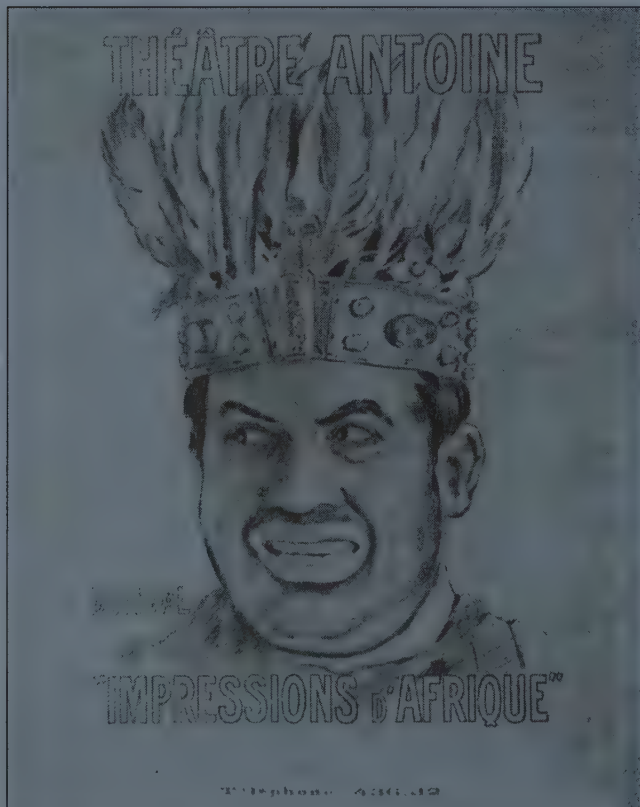
A little over six months had gone by since the first night of *Impressions d'Afrique* (and Mme Roussel's death), and the play was already being revived at the Théâtre Antoine (or rather, the "Théâtre Antonio-Stand-In", as *Le Rire* put it) in four acts and a prologue, from Saturday 11 May until Monday 10 June 1912. It was Firmin Gémier, the stand-in director, who agreed to put on *Impressions d'Afrique* at the author's expense. The "heavyweight" critics had not gone along to the Fémina; would they go to the Boulevard de Strasbourg? That is what Raymond Roussel hoped. He tried everything to attract the public. The walls of Paris were covered with large, coloured posters* representing the "main scenes" of the play: "the earthworm playing the cithara; the dwarf Philippo, whose normally-developed head is as tall as the rest of him; the one-legged Lelgoualch playing the flute using his own tibia; Jizme voluntarily electrocuted by lightning; the statue of corset whalebones rolling on rails of veal lights; the bexium thermodynamic orchestra; the wind clock from the land of Cockaigne; the cats playing prisoner's base; the wall of

* References in *Fantasio* of 1 June 1912 and *L'Ami du Peuple du soir* of 1 August 1933.

dominoes reminiscent of priests; the fallen deciduous rubber tree against which lies the corpse of Yaour IX, the negro king, classically costumed as Margarita in *Faust*; the Alcott brothers' echoing chests; the pin torture." This sort of captioned comic-strip is quite unusual in theatre advertising; it is more like the publicity for a circus or music hall, with the series of extraordinary "acts" it depicts. In fact, Roussel had simply adapted the strips of painted canvas he had seen on the popular theatres at the Fête de Neuilly:

All along, like a wall,
Canvas has been daubed with varieties
Of painting; they are scenes from comedies,
Each one framed by a large capital O.*

Another poster, in a style highly reminiscent of Punch and Judy, depicted the "final torment act". Finally, a smaller poster was totally covered by the actor Dorival's leering face, blackened and crowned with feathers.



Raymond Roussel [...] marked my youth with his scientific imagination. Perhaps you can remember having once seen on the billboards around wastelands a series of *images d'Épinal* illustrating various scenes from *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*. The former was dramatised by Raymond Roussel and staged at the Théâtre Antoine during the summer season, of course. I went to the opening night, which was rowdy, because the audience, whether for him or against him, was worked up and roared throughout the evening. Among the inventions were walls made of dominoes and rails of veal lights. I believe that Frenchmen deserve their reputation for frivolity for not having recognised that the Angel of Wisdom was speaking in that strange voice. Cyrano de Bergerac underwent a similar fate, and yet he had worked out the formula for a spherical balloon to take him to the moon.†

A "preview" by B. Depierre‡ informs us that the young author was "terribly keen on the theatre" and had "only one main preoccupation: to dramatisé his novel and have it staged in a large Parisian theatre. It was a sort of obsession, or *idée fixe*". And the journalist went on, exaggerating just slightly:

All of it is awash with light. We feel that we are living beneath a dazzling sun and below a sky that is always blue [...]. To give true local colour to his strange spectacle, M. Raymond Roussel has thrown about here and there an entire regiment of negroes, negresses and negrillos, the first of whom are proud, the second beautiful and the third amusing [...]. Every

* *The Doubling*.

† Chaffiol-Debillemont, *Bibliothèque tournante*, Messein, 1943.

‡ *Le Gaulois* (Rondel archives).

attempt has been made to give the public a series of tableaux depicting the customs of the peoples of Equatorial Africa. The public is sure to take a lively interest in it.

Roussel did even better. He sent his cast a poem, which was published in *Fantasio*:*

Did you think today, oh tragic actor,
That you'd play *Impressions of Africa*
Of which some facts give a criterion:
Thermodynamic bands on bexium,
The wall of dominoes resembling priests,
Statues run on the intestines of beasts,
The platinum horse with its fine master,
Dwarf Philippo, the cithara player...

Despite all his efforts, Roussel had to admit: "it was more than a failure, it provoked an outcry. I was accused of being mad, they 'hissed' the actors, threw money on stage, letters of protest were sent to the director" (Firmin Gémier). The reports in the press are damning. This is how the columnist of *Le Rire* (25 May), who was perhaps Gus Bofa and who signed his piece as "The In-House Doctor", concluded his article in the illustrated section, "*Le Rire au Théâtre*":†

On the evening of the dress rehearsal, screams of joy accompanied those literary efforts which required silent and profound concentration if they were to be enjoyed, and the merry spectators set about bringing off a formidable denial of critical justice.

However, after some time, the laughter in the theatre gradually stopped and a sort of torpor, prior to the knock-out, invaded the audience.

A few cases of congestion broke out in the middle of the third act and an improvised medical outfit began nursing the more urgent cases.

Those who were not too badly affected left by the corridors on the arms of their faithful friends, or were taken home in taxis. Soon the others were able to do likewise and, after summary treatment, to walk back to their homes through the dusk. The French character is decidedly not ready for abstraction.

Henry Bidou, who always appreciated Roussel's work, was less direct in his *Journal des Débats* column of 20 May. He had been disturbed by all those noisy protests:

The public manifested a sceptical, even hostile outlook. Three spectators behind me, who were of lowly status, gave proof of loud malevolence. They did what all unhappy Frenchmen do: gloriously reel off witticisms. God protect you, readers, from thus being caught between two lines of fire. A little further forwards, in the orchestra, M.P. Gailhard the former director of the Opéra was listening attentively, his fine face showing signs of the greatest astonishment.

Pierre Lazareff (did he actually go in person?) was to remember in *Paris-Midi* on 3 August 1933, "the screams that were provoked by the rails of veal lights". In

* "Fantasio's gossip", signed Fantasio (*Fantasio*, number 141, 1 June 1912). By mistake, Roussel is therein called "Henri."

† I.e. "Laughter in the theatre".



*Scenes from Impressions d' Afrique:
The duel between Talu VII and
Yaour IX; Jizme voluntarily elec-
trocuted by lightning.*

L'Intransigeant, Nozière wrote: "The opening night was rowdy. A spectator stood up and protested. Others heckled the actors. In the theatre, the author calmly watched these events [...]. Such incoherence filled the public with joy. They made fun of M. Raymond Roussel. I do not think that the author was as naïve as the audience imagined."

His nephew, Michel Ney, was then aged seven. "I saw my mother and heard her... They were throwing cooked potatoes at him... It was a terrible scandal, in fact. My mother was always frightened during Raymond Roussel's first nights... because she loved her brother."

When the curtain fell, and the announcement was made: "The play you have just seen performed before you is by...", a spectator yelled: "I blame his mother!"

Michel Leiris attended the opening night at the Théâtre Antoine with his parents: "I was twelve when I saw *Impressions d'Afrique*. My father was a good fellow who absolutely adored Roussel and understood precisely nothing about Rousselian literature. He went just to please Roussel. I found his plays highly amusing and, at the Théâtre Antoine, the performance was an incredible tumult! I had no idea of what Roussel really represented. For that, I had to wait until after the 1914 war, for *Locus Solus*." And, during the interval, Raymond Roussel asked Michel Leiris's parents: "Did you laugh much?", and he was especially concerned to know the children's reactions.

In the theatre were also Apollinaire, Marcel Duchamp, Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet. According to Duchamp: "It was wonderful. On stage there was a model and a snake that moved a little [the whalebone statue and the earthworm], it was pure bizarre madness. I cannot remember much about the words. We didn't listen a lot. That struck me..."* Elsewhere† he remarked: "It was primarily Roussel who was responsible for my glass, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even*. I derived my first overview of it from his *Impressions d'Afrique*. That play, which I saw with Apollinaire, greatly helped me to express myself in those early days".

But the scandal rapidly petered out:

The spectators have a strange attitude to this singular work. They have been promised constant bewilderment and find themselves up against a little irony, some spirit, puerility and trimmings. They are thus a little put out that the author is not making fun of them with true persistence. Finally, they are astonished that someone could manufacture plays just to please himself. And yet, there is a full house every night.‡

Meanwhile, how were the actors who were being "hissed" behaving? "This play which simultaneously nods at elements of pantomime, music hall, opera, cinema, farce and various other celebrated forms, is always performed in almost organised chaos by Madame Léonie Yahne [Adinolfi], Madame Carmen de Raisy [Louise Montalescot], whose part is rather dangerous, and by Messieurs Andreyor [Dodor],

* Pierre Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*, Belfond, 1967.

† *Marchand du sel*, remarks dating from 1946, and included in *Bizarre*, 34-5.

‡ "Échos de la Quinzaine: [...] au Théâtre Antoine. Reprise de *Impressions d'Afrique* de M. Raymond Roussel", *Comœdia illustré*, 1 June 1912.

Duard [Juillard], Tunc [Bex] and Dorival [Talu], whose negro smile remains one of his finest performances." Concerning these actors, on 1 June, the "*Bénisscur*" and "*La Mare aux cabots*" columns in *Fantasio* both expressed surprise that they had been "called out for so little", and "let's hope it wasn't for nothing"; Henry Bidou was more severe: "Talu [...] is played by M. Dorival, majestically dressed in purple, and has got himself up like a negro on a dynamometer. Still not content with such advantages, M. Dorival has decided to be funny. Wit is a terrible thing in an actor. M. Dorival's consists in taking his time and tacking a silent *e* on to the end of each word. It is obvious that this celebrated actor is having to ham it up, and is doing so gracelessly. He is terribly dull. He betrays the play, something that he has absolutely no right to do, and he lets himself express a taste which would not pass even at Grenelle." Among the shipwrecked are "an actress, Adinolf, played by Mlle Yahne; this is the leading role, at least on the poster. But she does not act and serves no purpose. Of the men, the captain of the boat is played by M. Duard. This actually pleasant actor does the opposite of M. Dorival and reels off his lines at an astonishing rate; at the same time he smiles calmly; meanwhile, the speech runs on, and the words follow one another in a quite incomprehensible manner."*

The cast was roughly the same as that employed in 1911 at the Théâtre Fémina. The role of Talu, first played by Marquet, was taken over by Dorival; that of Bex, first played by Saint-Iles, was taken by Tunc; and that of Skariofszky, first played by Le Prieur, was taken by Chazy. Four new parts appeared in this revival: Rul (Mme Anifa), Whirligig (Michelez), Alcott (Chandora) and the executioner (Uré), which leads us to think that the gala and the torture scenes were fleshed out, while others were cut. What is more, the programme announced: "In the fourth act, the *Jeruka*, a native anthem sung by M. Dutilloy of the Opéra-Comique", though we do not know whether he sang the whole of that epic in the form in which it has come down to us, or just an extract. Another change in the programme was that the dances had now been arranged by Mme Van Goeten.†

In general, the press (and the audiences) understood nothing. A few cautious critics alluded to *Ubu Roi*, which was safe enough. This was the explanation used by Firmin Gémier (who, in 1908, had played the title role) for his allowing such an apparently incoherent play to be performed. As for Nozière, he observed: "I heard the same laughter provoked by this play as when we performed *Ubu Roi*. Today, everyone repeats that *Ubu* is a masterpiece. In a few years, *Impressions d'Afrique* might be proclaimed another masterpiece. Who knows?" Maybe there was something in it after all.

If you want a job done well then you had better do it yourself. So Raymond Roussel paid for an article to be published in *Le Théâtre* written by a certain "Ergaste", to emphasise the fact that he was the prisoner of a literary genre. Despite trying hard and having press cuttings (about the novel) sent to him by Roussel, this

* Column in *Journal des Débats*, 20 May 1912.

† A full cast-list of the revival in 1912 can be found in *Bizarre*, 34-5, along with an analysis of the play by Henry Bidou (*Journal des Débats*, 20 May 1912) and a study by John Ashbery of the various versions of *Impressions d'Afrique*.

hack was ill at ease and had difficulty filling up his three pages, half of which consist of illustrations. But the piece is interesting because it reflects Roussel's own view of the stage adaptation:

... That power which Raymond Roussel's chimerical invention exercises upon us does not really seem to survive outside the book. Transferring those hallucinatory images to the strict and coherent context of the stage was as vain an endeavour, in our opinion, as trying to dramatise Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* or *The War of the Worlds*. This gamble could be attempted by an incautious imagination, but it was doomed to failure.

Now M. Raymond Roussel has attempted just such a gamble and, faced with apparently insurmountable problems, has won through brilliantly.*

A final press article, dated 11 June† and entitled: "Talu is dead... Long live Talu!", was also clearly inspired by Roussel:

M. Raymond Roussel's play *Impressions d'Afrique* was performed at the Théâtre Antoine for forty days. We had become accustomed to it and did not think that it would close so soon. But, alas, this was not to be. The last performance was yesterday evening, in front of a full and enthusiastic house. No more shall we see Talu, the black king, the scientist with his umbrella and folding stool, the Englishwoman with her stage accent, the blind fiancée, the negroes, the whalebone statue rolling on rails of veal lights, the earthworm playing the cithara and the Alcott brothers.

And yet, going to the Théâtre Antoine was a daily pleasure. We laughed, whistled, "hissed". Even the actors often sided with the audience and that unexpected communication between the stage and the house was truly delightful.

M. Dorival was a sublime Talu. He acted the part forty times and, forty times over, he came up with new and unforeseeable business.

He is leaving that glorious role with infinite regret. Yesterday, before the curtain fell on the last act, he stabbed himself with his dagger and cried out: "Long live the French!" Such was the conclusion of that jolly play's pleasant career, and we hope to see it again soon for our further delight and enlightenment.

Only Roussel would have had the idea of congratulating an actor on his "new and unforeseeable business"! He was in fact very pleased with the cast and gave them copies of his novel and large signed stage photographs.

If the end of the article is to be believed, Roussel intended to revive *Impressions d'Afrique* yet again. Meanwhile, he asked Lugné-Poe to organise a tour in the north of France, Belgium and Holland.‡ He personally took a walk-on part, playing the role of the sailor who takes away Jizme's burnt body.§ André Rivoire even reported that he acted alongside his cast "with a lady friend [Charlotte Dufrène?], his doctor [Dr Mattin?] and his valet". Yet Pierre Frondaie was surely exaggerating when he said that he had seen Roussel queue up at the end of the show with the other bit-parts to receive his pay. What is certain is that on the two stage photos where the two sailors of the *Lyncée* can be seen, on the right, in front of the whalebone statue of the helot, one of the sailors is Raymond Roussel. He just could not resist dressing up. ¶

* *Le Théâtre*, no. 323, 1-15 June 1912. Colour cover portrait of Léonie Yahne; full-page colour illustration of M. Dorival in the role of Talu; four photographs in the text: after the shipwreck of the *Lyncée*, the Europeans present themselves to the Emperor Talu (Act I); the duel between Talu VII and Yaour IX (Act II); the earthworm playing the cithara (Act III); Jizme voluntarily electrocuted by lightning (Act IV). Photos from the *Fémina*.

† And not 6 June, as mis-stated in *Bizarre*, 34-5, p.21; the "last night" was not on the 5th, but on 10 June, as confirmed in the daily announcements in *Comœdia* (there are only thirty days between 11 May and 10 June, while the article speaks of "forty days").

‡ As confirmed in the inscriptions: "to Mme Jeanne Dulac with thankful recollections of *Impressions d'Afrique* in Belgium and Holland" (*Cahier de dédicaces*, B.N. Manuscripts Dept.); and to Lugné-Poe, on a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* in January 1927: "in friendly remembrance of the *Impressions d'Afrique* tour in Belgium and Holland" (Bibliothèque d'un amateur: *Surréalisme, livres et documents*, C. Galanteris, Th. Bodin, Drouot, 23-4 March 1981).

§ Letter from Régis Gignoux of 22 January 1927, communicated by Michel Lacroix.

¶ * There is an object lying on the ground by his right foot, but it is impossible to make out what it is.



There were other incidents during this tour. In Lille, there was mayhem: Roussel, in his sailor's suit, got down from the stage, started playing the piano... and triumphed! On another occasion, in Holland, there was only one spectator in the house: Roussel insisted that the play be performed just for him, and that the price of his seat be refunded when he left.

If we can believe Alexandre de Varennes, who played Yaour at the Théâtre Antoine and Talu during the tour, and who later became a film-maker, Roussel expressed an interest in having a film made of his book. However, when René Clair read *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, he hoped "in vain to make a film with their author, after *Entr'acte*"† (so after 1924); he later wrote to him again from Hollywood. But did Roussel go to the cinema as much as he did the theatre? No trace can be found in his works or his papers of even the slightest interest in the cinema: was Roussel, who went to see the same play several times in order to spot the tiny differences in the actors' performances, dissatisfied with an art that fixes the slightest gesture for ever? All we know about his relationship with the cinema is a card addressed to Francis Picabia in which he apologised for not being able to attend a showing of René Clair's *Entr'acte*!

† Letter to Jean Ferry, 20 December 1965 (*Organographes du Cymbalum pataphysicum*, no. 24, 5 September 1984).

MARGUERITE ROUSSEL'S ESTATE

The performances at the Théâtre Antoine, and the tour in the provinces and abroad, cost Raymond Roussel a fortune. But he had no material worries! When she died in 1911, Mme Roussel left her fortune to her two children in a handwritten will dated 27 August 1909. The bulk of this fortune consisted of stocks and shares. The will was officially read by Maître Constantin, a notary, on 21 October 1911. The division took place only on 13 June 1912, after the performances at the Théâtre Antoine.

On 28 March 1911, six months before her death, Marguerite Roussel was concerned about her estate and noted in her diary: "Constantin please remove wish for public auction and ask Mme [Louise] de Broissia's advice I want to add to my last codicil."* We know that Mme Roussel had fallen out with her daughter, though we do not know why. In the will, one third of the capital was left to Germaine (of which one sixth was her personal property, and one sixth paid over as a dowry, as stipulated in her marriage contract), and two thirds to Raymond. As for the properties, Raymond was to occupy the house in Neuilly and Germaine the mansion on Rue de Chaillot. The villa in Biarritz, the construction of which had cost 3,800,000 francs, was added to the capital, which had been valued at 1,700,000, and the furnishings estimated at 105,426.75 francs; it became the joint possession of Raymond Roussel and his brother-in-law Charles Ney.

Five months after her death, and before the partition, articles from Mme Roussel's estate were auctioned at what was to be one of the great sales of 1912. It was a society event, and was mentioned in another article by Sterling Heiling in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, of which Raymond Roussel kept a copy in translation: "The Rue de Sèze is blocked by superb horses and private carriages. Clubmen and grand ladies are pushed around by the hoards of merchants and tourists. What is happening here?"

Several documents tell us precisely what: firstly, the luxurious 120-page 25 x 33 catalogue, illustrated by sixty-six phototype plates, printed by Georges Petit;† then a series of photographs of the living-rooms in the Rue de Chaillot mansion and the villa in Biarritz.

The auction took place in Paris, at the Galerie Georges-Petit, 8, Rue de Sèze, on Monday 25, Tuesday 26, Wednesday 27 and Thursday 28 March 1912, from two in the afternoon. Between 1880 and 1920, the Galerie Petit was the most important art gallery in Paris. Comtesse Greffulhe, Jacques Doucet, Veil-Picard and Sarah Bernhardt could be found there. The private showings and auctions were much frequented. Georges Petit organised fashionable *soirées* in his rooms, sometimes including performances. He admired Meissonier, and probably sold Mme Roussel her Ziem and her cumbersome collection of Eugène Lami watercolours, but

* Raymond Roussel sent a signed copy of *Impressions d'Afrique* to Mme "the Vicomtesse de Froissard Broissia [for "Froissard de Broissia"], in affectionate recollection of her touching and faithful attachment to my dear mother's memory". Later, on 8 April 1919, during a trip to Tunisia, he tried to send her a three-kilo parcel from Carthage "containing a marble knick-knack"; on 11 April, on the direction of the Protectorate, the shipment was refused on the grounds that it was not permitted for works of old or modern art to leave Tunisia.

† There is another 104-page 12 x 20 catalogue, with the same descriptions but unillustrated; and a twenty-page 16 x 24 summary in a white cover.

*The living-rooms in the mansion
on Rue de Chaillot.*



probably more interesting items as well. Despite being faithful to the masters of the Salon and his successive sales of Millet's *Angelus*, which finally reached one million francs-or, Georges Petit rapidly saw what a commercial success the Impressionists were going to be. He was the one responsible for exhibiting Renoir's *Grandes Baigneuses* and for organising the retrospective of Monet's work in 1889.

The auctioneers at the Roussel sale were Maître F. Lair-Dubreuil and Maître Henri Baudoin. The painting experts were M. Georges Petit, assisted by M. Wildenstein; for the objets d'art, MM. Paulme and B. Lasquin (*fils*), together with Mme Guédu and M. Haas; for the jewellery, M. Boucheron and the MM. Mellerio (who were known as Meller). There were two views: a private showing on Saturday 23rd, from one-thirty to six o'clock, and a public view on Sunday 24th at the same times.

When opening the catalogue, one cannot help but wonder who wrote the notices describing the works of art. Their characteristics, dimensions, commentaries on the artists, the history of previous sales and collections which preceded Mme Roussel's, were of course written by experts. But what of the handful of lines that describe "the subject"? If it was not true that this precise, yet elaborate descriptive style was the same as we generally meet with in auction catalogues, then it would be tempting to

attribute it to Raymond Roussel himself. For describing a painting was rather like restarting *La Vue* once again, but this time in prose. The first entry was a painting by Jean-Baptiste Charpentier (1728-1806), entitled *Mischief near the Fountain*, and this was the description:

A young woman was out walking, laden down like a chambermaid and holding her baby son by the hand. While both of them were passing near a fountain, a mischievous girl amused herself by spraying water on to the boy who, with an expressive pout presumably accompanied by tears, indicates that he finds the joke to be in extremely bad taste.

Would Roussel have used the past simple and continuous tense before the painted scene of the present?

Second entry. Alexandre-François Desportes (1661-1743), *Still-life*:

Among the fruit baskets, a dog creeps up to sniff at a hare abandoned on the ground near some cucumbers.

Would Roussel have seen a dog as “creeping” (“à pas de loup”)?

Third entry. *The Monkey and the Parrot*, also by Desportes:

Some fruit has been placed on a stone ledge: peaches, grapes, plums, figs, as well as some partridges and a hare. On the handle of a basket, a macaw is defending these succulent victuals as though they were its property, showing its claws and a threatening beak to a marmoset that is coming up on the right and, with its mouth open, seems to be shouting insults. In the background, a park.

We are clearly miles away from the detailed precision of *La Vue*: Roussel would have distanced himself from the subjects. He would not have failed to mention the vase on the left-hand side, or the banisters on the right, on which the two birds have been placed. He would have seen that the marmoset, at the bottom-right, has already knocked over a basket of fruit, that it is not “coming up” but retreating, and looks less like it is “shouting insults” than is afraid of the beating of the macaw’s wings (which obviously can hardly show its claws, since it is using them in order to perch “on the handle of a basket”). It is of course not impossible that Raymond Roussel, who knew these works of art well and had grown up among them, helped one of the writers with the notices. But who? No documentary proof has come down to us to enable any attribution to be made.

Below is a summary of the catalogue. This perhaps rather over-detailed list of the works of art Raymond Roussel was familiar with is of interest because it allows us to gauge his mother’s tastes (and fortune).

The objects that can be made out in photographs of the Rue de Chaillot mansion and the villa in Biarritz are marked by a ●.

EARLY PAINTINGS

- Jean-Baptiste Charpentier: *Mischief near the Fountain* (entry no. 1).
 Alexandre-François Desportes: *Still-life* (no. 2); *The Monkey and the Parrot* (no. 3).
 François-Hubert Drouais: ● *Two Little Savoyards (the Prince and the Chevalier de Bouillon)* (no. 4); *A Young Pupil* (no. 5); *Little Girl with a Cat* (no. 6).
 Jean-Honoré Fragonard: *"Education is Everything"* (no. 7); *Madame de Norenval* (no. 8).
 Henri-Frédéric Füger: ● *Portrait of Elisabeth of Wurtemberg* (no. 9).
 Thomas Gainsborough: *"Blue Boy"* (no. 10).
 Jean-Baptiste Greuze: *Portrait of Babuti the Bookseller* (no. 11).
 Jan van Huysum: *The Little Mouse* (no. 12).
 Sir Thomas Lawrence: *Portrait of the Countess of Wilton* (no. 13); ● *Portrait of Sir Charles Lauther* (no. 14); *Georgiana, Lady Gordon* (no. 15).
 Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié: *Self-Seeking Politeness* (no. 16).
 F.-H. Mans: *Arrival of Fishing Boats on a Small Dutch Beach* (no. 17).
 School of Mignard: *Portrait of a Child Princess* (no. 18).
 Jean-Marc Nattier: ● *Portrait Presumed to be of Pauline-Félicité de Mailly* (no. 19).
 Hubert Robert: ● *Rest in the Park* (no. 20); *The Spring at Vesta's Temple* (no. 21); *Teatime* (no. 22); *Rest at the End of the Park* (no. 23).
 Franz Schnyder: *At the Market* (no. 24).

GOUACHE

- Jean-Baptiste Huet: *The Old Tower* (no. 25).

MODERN PAINTINGS

- Richard Parkes Bonington: *Going Out on the Rue Royale* (no. 26).
 Charles Chaplin: *Child's Play* (no. 27).
 Jean-Baptiste Corot: *Dance under the Trees by a Lake* (no. 28).
 Eugène Lambert: *The Consignment* (no. 29).
 Philippe Rousseau: *The Dove Fountain* (no. 30); *Bench with Flowers and Bagpipes* (no. 31).
 Jules-Jacques Veyrassat: *The Watering Trough* (no. 32).
 Felix Ziem: *In the Lagoon* (no. 33).

WATERCOLOURS

- Eugène Lami: *The Rendezvous*; *The Veterans*; *A Glove*; *A Party Head*; *The Hunt*; *The Pré-aux-Clercs*; *White Magic*; *Last Effort (Night of St Bartholomew's Massacre)* (nos. 34-41).

SCULPTURE

- Clésinger: *Sappho* (no. 42).

MINIATURES

Nos. 43-70: miniatures by J.-B.-J. Augustin, Bornet, M.-G. Capet, J. Charlier, Drouais, French Eighteenth-Century School, Hall, O. Humphrey, J.-B. Isabey (three miniatures), Jung, A. Kauffmann, C.-G. Klingstet, Konta, Léger, L. Moreau, L.-L. Péron (two), Rouvier, Sicardi (two), Mme Vigée-Lebrun, L. Villers, Welper.

OBJETS D'ART AND FURNISHINGS

DISPLAY OBJECTS

●Boxes, cases, caskets, flasks, watches, etc., of which a large number can be seen on the occasional tables (nos. 71-110). Old fans (nos. 111-24).

OLD CHINESE PORCELAIN

Cups, ●vases, plates, pots, statuettes, candlesticks, etc. (nos. 125-42).

OLD DRESDEN CHINA

Marguerite Roussel's largest collection consisted of Dresden china, numbers 143 to 221 in the catalogue; it was also her most well-balanced and, for the time, original collection. It meant much to her; and if her son denied describing reality, he referred to this china at least four times in his work. These figurines had marked his childish imagination and he never forgot them.

Firstly, in *The Seine* we find this dialogue:

EUDELINÉ

I've seen some Dresden-ware at a good price.

BALS

You needn't tell me, I know that window
Right off by heart!

EUDELINÉ

That bare-chested negro
With a bright white smile...

BALS

Yes, it's so well made!
And that boat with a dolphin figurehead
Dragging it on, inside a woman decked
In sky blue, hair like Marie Antoinette;
That man, too, rolling a Japanese lord
In a wheelbarrow. Superb!... Take my word
For it, they're perfect; best is that village
Bride crying her eyes quite out in umbrage
Because below her dress is now ragged
From brambles — I'm thrilled; and her blue and red
Stockings are detailed like rays of sunlight!

Oddly enough, none of the Dresden pieces described in *La Seine* seems to have figured in Marguerite Roussel's collection! Raymond Roussel never described, he created; what is more, this explains why he resorted to his use of *bouts-rimés*.

In *The Dust of Suns* (Act IV, scene V), we find, like in the mansion on Rue de Chaillot, a "shop window full of Dresden-china figures that at night, brought to life by a moonbeam, converse with one another". These objects, set in motion by a child's dream, are "ranked in the shop window according to their value. So that while a Cockney, a flunkey, a chain-gang prisoner are preening themselves in the front row, in the back a marchioness at her harpsichord, a crowned king, and a surpliced pontiff sulk neglected [...] the author wished to establish by this a satirical contrast with society, where so often rank clashes with worth."*

Roussel recopied the beginning of this quotation in the inscription in the copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* given to Mme Juliette Jannet in January 1927: was this to remind her of the collection of Dresden china that she could well have seen in her youth at Mme Roussel's house, and to give her one of the keys to the play? The apparently random order of the sale catalogue of 1912 perhaps follows this very display-cabinet presentation. For example, from number 161 to number 174, a cake-seller can be found alongside a young shepherdess, a Marquis holding a bouquet, two gardeners, a hen with her chicks, a farmer, a peasant, a harlequin, a pilgrim, children in oriental costumes, etc.

In *The Star on the Forehead*, Joussac the antiques dealer shows Trézel the collector a "Dresden figure of [a] hurdy-gurdy player". There do not seem to be any hurdy-gurdy players in the catalogue.

On the other hand, entry 185 invites our attention: it is an "important group of old coloured-porcelain figures: *The Rape of Europa*. Height: 22.5 cm; width: 20.5 cm", reproduced in one of the plates. Now, in *In Havana*,† the lady president of the club, called M— (John Ashbery points out that Mme Roussel's first name was Marguerite), is asked "to invent for herself some insignia, the wearing of which during meetings would attest to her authority".

Prodded thus, she began to reflect seriously and, after a period of dissatisfaction, by force of elimination finally adopted a bold idea — at first rejected as overshooting the mark.

In fact it was a matter not of a simple ornamental accessory, but of an entire costume.

Among a group of Dresden porcelains displayed since time immemorial in a vitrine in her parlour was one depicting the Rape of Europa. A graceful garment closely modelled after that of the statuette — and completed by a flesh-coloured leotard — became her presidential regalia.‡

This flesh-coloured leotard was certainly one way of stopping her from presiding naked! No doubt Raymond Roussel had only a vague memory of that statuette which depicted Europa naked, straddling the bull, while two of her kneeling companions

* Translation by Harry Mathews.

† First published by John Ashbery in *L'Arc*, 19, from the proofs belonging to Jacques Hérold, with a reproduction of this Dresden figurine (from the catalogue, the original having not yet been retraced).

‡ Translation by John Ashbery.

deck the animal with flowers. It is also true that he might have had the catalogue in front of him, since his sister had kept a copy of it.

But we now know that when Roussel said that, for him, “imagination is everything”, he was not speaking the exact truth. Memory, too, had its part to play in his creative imagination, especially memories of objects that had an almost fetishistic fascination for him.

It would take too long to describe all of those statuettes. Suffice it to say that numbers 219 and 220 are two allegorical groups depicting *Africa* and *America*, reproduced in the catalogue, which must have stood beside *The Rape of Europa*.

VARIOUS OLD EUROPEAN PORCELAINS

Chantilly, Chelsea, Frankenthal, Germany, Hoechst, Lorraine, Menecy-Villeroi, Nymphenburg, Saint-Cloud, Sèvres, Zurich (nos. 222-38).

DIVERSE OBJECTS

Ebony chest, Louis XV wall-clock (nos. 239-40).

BRONZE FURNISHINGS

●Louis XVI clocks and candlesticks (nos. 241-4).

ANTIQUE FURNITURE

Sedan-chair, Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI tables, Louis XV and Louis XVI chests-of-drawers, Louis XV wardrobes, Louis XV and Louis XVI desks, a ●Louis XV secretaire decorated with Chinese lacquered panels, inter-Régence furniture, a large Louis XVI chiffonier (nos. 245-60).

LIVING-ROOM FURNITURE

No. 261: ●“living-room furniture including: a large settee and four large armchairs of carved and gilded wood, their backs and seats upholstered with antique Gobelin tapestry dating from the Régence, presenting on a glazed yellow background porticoes with arabesques garlanded with leaves, fruit and flowers, and decked with birds: doves, parrots, budgerigars, etc. Wood carved and gilded. Formerly in the collection of M. le Comte Boni de Castellane. Collection Édouard Chapey. Retrospective exhibition of French art at the Petit Palais, 1900, no. 2887.”

No. 262: large screen with four panels covered with antique tapestry from the royal mill at Beauvais (Régence); three other screens of five to six panels (nos. 263-5).

No. 266: ●tapestry from the royal mill at Beauvais (Régence period), from the cartoons of Baptiste Vernansal and Blin de Fontenay: *The Prince's Audience*. Height: 3.55 m; width: 5.05 m [in the photograph of the salon in the Rue de Chaillot mansion, Drouais's painting *Two Little Savoyards* hangs in front of this tapestry].

Nos. 267-9: three Gobelin tapestries, copied from Coypel, eighteenth century: *Tobias* (4.30 x 4.60 m); *Esther and Ahasuerus* (4.08 x 5.16 m); *Laban* (3.30 x 2.40 m).

PEARLS AND JEWELLERY

Pearl necklaces, brooches, necklaces and diadems of brilliants and emeralds, sets, ear-rings, bracelets, etc. (no. 270-313).

In particular, these include a necklace of one hundred and six white pearls (1052 grains) including four black pearls (285 grains) and an acorn-shaped white pearl (90 grains): the four large black pearls, the acorn-shaped white pearl and four large hangings of emeralds and rubies came from the jewel collection of H.R.H. Princess Mathilde.

Though this catalogue may seem extraordinary, it lists far from all of the furnishings that can be seen in photographs of Mme Roussel's salons on Rue de Chaillot. Little is known about the furnishings in the villa in Biarritz (except for the two Hubert Robert canvases, a Chinese vase, a table, chairs, etc.) and nothing about Neuilly, which must have been comfortably decorated. What is more, certain pieces remained in joint ownership between Raymond Roussel and his sister (the villa in Biarritz, for example, but not its contents, since the two Hubert Robert paintings were auctioned in Paris; and perhaps the collection of Dresden porcelain?). Both of them kept items of sentimental value; for example, Raymond bought one of the three Thomas Lawrence paintings (which he would try to sell in 1929); and Germaine, perhaps, the harp that can be seen in the photograph of Rue de Chaillot:

* *The Seine.*

† As named in the list of prices at the auction: is this the same as the Nattier in the auction catalogue or were there two different paintings? [Trans.]

‡ A few other prices for the paintings: no. 1, 3100 francs; nos. 2 and 3, 12,000; no. 9, 100,000; no. 11, 109,500; no. 12, 2000; no. 14, 116,000; no. 16, 33,000; no. 17, 1050; no. 18, 2150; no. 20 and 21, 95,000; nos. 22 and 23, 40,000; no. 24, 43,000; no. 25, 1800; no. 26, 85,000; no. 27, 10,600; no. 29, 2200; no. 30, 8000; no. 31, 4000; no. 32, 8600 and no. 33, 6200.

... it's far more graceful for women;
The harp is not an instrument for men.*

This estate auction raised the total sum of 4,750,000 francs-or. The paintings fetched 2,797,875 francs, the porcelain 275,155, the furniture 821,685. Lawrence's *Portrait of the Countess of Wilton* alone reached 435,000 francs; the Corot 310,000; Fragonard's *"Education is Everything"* 250,000 and his *Portrait of Madame de Norenval* 120,500; Nattier's *Portrait of Mme de Vintimille as Flora* [?][†] 195,000; the three Drouais paintings, *A Young Pupil* 205,000, *Two Little Savoyards* 175,000 and *Little Girl with a Cat* 135,000; and Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* 72,000.[‡]

The winding-up of the estate by Maître Constantin was completed by the end of the year.

MICHEL NEY. RAYMOND ROUSSEL AS HOST

Before Germaine took up house for good in the Rue de Chaillot mansion, the Duc and Duchesse d'Elchingen lived on Quai Debilly. They had subscriptions to the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, and a motor-car. Charles Ney was a member of the Jockey-Club, of the Cercle de la Rue Royale, the Sporting Club, the Travellers' Club, and so on. But Germaine Roussel's second marriage had never been a very solid one. As soon as he became engaged, Charles Ney was seen in the Bois de Boulogne with Mlle de Nesle, a *demi-mondaine* — Germaine had bumped into them, turned aside, then Charles had apologised. After having gone out on a riotous stag night on the evening after their civil ceremony, Charles had not calmed down. He was weak and would come home begging for forgiveness, saying he would do anything to straighten his life out, even join the army, but without doing anything about it. Germaine grew weary of this. As soon as her mother died, she started thinking of divorcing him. But, in 1912, he beat her to it, accusing her of having refused to grant him his conjugal rights since 1906. The husband blamed the wife for loving only his title; the wife the husband for wanting only her money. The dispute was to last until 1917. Finally, they did not divorce, but lived apart.

Nevertheless, Raymond Roussel remained on excellent terms with his brother-in-law; we know it was Charles who introduced him to Charlotte Dufrène and who wanted him to join the Jockey-Club.

Raymond was also a frequent guest at his sister's. He would arrive at Rue de Chaillot at mealtimes, but would not eat. He would sit down at the piano and sing romantic songs. He fascinated his young nephew Michel, who was born in 1905:

For me, he was just like a friend, a child. He spoilt me terribly... Yes, for me he was a really indulgent uncle. He came to see me nearly every day, and almost always brought me a present. He was the nicest person I knew... He was a god to me. [...]

The only amusing incident happened when I was young... at the time, I was going to Haffner's classes; one day, I saw an old man who looked about a hundred, and my uncle coming towards me and saying: "Do you know who this is?" Of course I didn't, so then he told me: "It's an old man who was present when they shot Marshal Ney". I've no idea where he unearthed this old fellow... and then the old man started giving me a detailed account of what had happened when he'd seen Marshal Ney being shot... He must have been at least a hundred at the time, just think about it!... I don't know if he really saw the execution of Marshal Ney... it's not very likely... But my uncle adored things like that... Ah! he was so proud to introduce me to that old fellow... He was at least a hundred... But had he really been there when they shot Marshal Ney?... My uncle had picked this fellow up somewhere and was so proud of himself, because that kind of thing greatly amused him... He found it funny... I'm sure he must have given the old boy a lot of money to make him come to Haffner's classes... But that amused my uncle... As for me, I was frightened.

He got to know his nephew's teacher, M. Bellonet, who admired the perfection of his speech. Roussel gave him copies of his books, but they were beyond him. Generously, he also gave presents to his nephew Maxime Grimprel and his nieces, Colette, the older of the two (who received signed copies on Japanese vellum of all Roussel's books, inscribed "with great affection"), and Nicole, whom we shall meet again later.

But Roussel remained highly mysterious. What did he do during the day? He worked...

In the words of Michel Ney:

He left his friends and family completely out of his literary preoccupations. He never spoke about that [...]. I have the feeling that the family didn't encourage him. If he was encouraged, it was... by friends, by writers, but definitely not by the family for, right from the start, his books and theatre shows were flops, total flops, and he was resented by the family that was, at the time, extremely prim and proper and understood nothing about such things [...]. Raymond Roussel was not a sociable person, in the sense that he lived rather mysteriously and led, I think, a double existence. But he was friendly when you knew him, and with the family. He was not very sociable, he had very few friends and didn't see many people. But, outside that, he definitely had a second life. He had his artist's life, his life as a writer, which he was totally, totally secretive about. He never spoke about it to anyone [...]. Never, never, Roussel never entertained anyone, anyone at all.

According to Roger Vitrac (who seems to have been invited to Charlotte Dufrène's on Rue Pierre-Charron, in 1928, or else to a tea-room on Rue Royale*):

He is thought to be a misanthropist. He lives far away from cliques and cabals. How does he spend his time? We don't know. Someone told me that he stayed all afternoon in his study, pacing up and down, stopping in front of the closed window, tapping on the panes, then pacing again until nightfall.

Does he go out at night? Apparently.

You want to see him? It's almost impossible. A secretary has been employed to pass himself off as him [?].

Have you tried to telephone him? There is no answer, because it has been fixed only to send calls and not to receive any.

Michel Leiris noted:

What is more, since he was afraid of being offended in conversations or of offending, he said that he avoided dangerous discussions with people by asking them the questions.

André Breton† was struck by the turns in his conversation:

The clearest recollection I have, from the few brief meetings I had with him, is of a man who was *hidden*. If he stayed that way throughout the time our group stayed together, say between 1922 and 1928, it was not because none of us — Michel Leiris (whose brother [Pierre, then

* Philippe Soupault, *Arts*, 26 September 1962.

† *Fronton-virage*.

an outside broker] was, I think, Roussel's accountant) — had any chance to frequent him or — Robert Desnos, trusting in the reception Roussel had given his witticism during *L'Étoile au Front* — nobody really tried to get inside his profound anonymity. But no matter how hard Leiris tried, he never managed to turn the conversation away from a stream of banalities, and even though Desnos was very graciously received, he came back discouraged after his visits.

"His life was constructed like his books," Dr Pierre Janet told Michel Leiris. Roussel deplored progress, which put at everybody's disposal what should have been restricted to the happy few:

The same sufferer makes other reflections about what he calls the "loss of inaccessibility". He is upset to hear of a new mechanical breakthrough or a new record: "Aeroplanes have flown to Geneva in three hours, and we shall soon go to the Indies in three days, how awful! The trip to Italy was reserved for the rich, going to America was difficult and costly, luxury is being vulgarised. The lower-middle classes have bathrooms, couchettes have been put in third-class carriages, can you think of anything more abominable? In the past, being king of France was something marvellous, reserved to special families that had been chosen by Heaven; nowadays, any old lawyer can become President of the Republic and take himself for Louis XIV, it removes all value from government."

Such thoughts might occur to anybody, and cause a moment's discussion, but for Martial they are of enormous significance, and are constantly present in everything he sees, in every line of the newspapers, in every conversation. When this starts, it goes on for hours: when he is alone, he is incapable of escaping, he builds up arguments for and against, but can never conclude. That incessant work, which he feels is vaguely useless and absurd but which he cannot stop, tires him and brings on anxiety: he has been disturbed and worn out by strange thoughts for years. [...] Martial's obsession comes from a not particularly noble sentiment, but one that is common among psychological depressives: the need for exclusivity and a mania for rights. He has a mistress [did Pierre Janet not work out that Roussel was homosexual?], he is wealthy, he has undertaken several wonderful journeys, these are privileges that he must keep; others must not trample on his territory. He does not realise that he himself could take advantage of progress, go on faster and more beautiful journeys by aeroplane, for he is horrified by future actions and especially by new actions. Like all psychasthenics, he wants to retain the benefit of previous actions and maintain an acquired superiority. Things have to be forbidden to others if he is going to feel their value when he possesses them [...]. The only pleasure is if he alone wins the jackpot, other people's happiness makes him suffer.

Let us not consider these ideas from a moral point of view, but from a psychological one. Firstly, they indicate a weakness and instability when it comes to pleasure: the sufferer needs to add the spice of privilege to things before he can enjoy them; his sexual pleasure has diminished, or he thinks it has, if he considers his own to be banal. [Just how much did Roussel confide in Pierre Janet? We shall never know.] It is a form of that devaluation of pleasure that we see in his morose inaction and which can lead to asceticism. Martial certainly manifests that weakness of feelings: he cannot tolerate the slightest unfavourable criticism of great musicians or great writers whom he admires and loves [...]. He feels that his convictions are as shaky as his pleasures, and his obsessive "fear of failure" takes root in his weakness.

LOCUS SOLUS

Having mentioned the failure of the tour of *Impressions d'Afrique* in his posthumous book, Raymond Roussel added: "During that time, I was writing *Locus Solus*," which is rather vague. Now, between 6 April, marked at the start of the manuscript of Chapter IV, and 28 February at the end (neither mention the year), the date 29 October 1912 occurs, one year after his mother's death, and also the date 29 November, followed by Roussel's signature. The various states of *Locus Solus* kept in the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, in twelve bound volumes containing over 400 unpublished pages, allow us to form an idea of the immensity of the work, which was never really finished. If, for example, Boudet, who first turns into Daniel Saron, finally becomes Martial Canterel in the proofs, the very title *Locus Solus* appears only in the last manuscript version that was sent to the printers. It is clear that Roussel himself was so fascinated by his work that he had the 650 pages he had prepared for publication bound into superb plain leather covers by Gruel.*

The novel was finished some time between 3 and 19 November 1913, when Raymond Roussel finished his second period in the reserves of the 19th Squadron of the Army Service Corps in Paris. *Swann's Way* had just been published by Grasset; *Locus Solus* was serialised in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*. According to Roussel: "It passed by completely unnoticed". However, the first episode appeared in the special Christmas issue, dated 6-7 December 1913. The succeeding episodes were published every fortnight until the issue of 28-29 March 1914 inclusive — with an eight-page supplement for the ninth and final instalment! Meanwhile, Lemerre was having the book printed. Alphonse Lemerre had died the previous year on 15 October 1912, at the age of seventy-four; it would seem that Raymond Roussel never had any contact with him, but only with his son Désiré, and his successors.

The first important discrepancy between the book and the serial is that, in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, the novel is not called *Locus Solus*, but *A Few Hours in Bougival*. Each episode was illustrated by a strip showing the entrance to a park, with the inscription "Locus Solus" on the fronton of the gate. The first sentence makes it clear that Canterel's villa is in Bougival; in book form it was to be transferred to Montmorency. Now, in Montmorency, just near the Place des Cerisiers, can be found the house of Jean-Jacques... Rousseau, and several of Raymond Roussel's friends lived there. He inscribed a copy "to Jacques Abbattucci, a token from a highly devoted old friend"; Jacques was the son of Mme Abbattucci, née Rey de Foresta, the widow of General Antoine-Dominique Abbattucci, who was a friend of Mme Roussel, and whose family seat was in Montmorency. Another copy went "to my dear Louis Ganderax, at whose house in Montmorency I remember spending a wonderful day, thanks to his formidable wit, which, in my memory,

* In 1891, Léon Gruel (1841-1923) became the owner of the bookbinders', one of the first in Paris, on Rue Saint-Honoré, near Rue Royale. As he believed modern bindings should depart from tradition, he is sometimes accused of becoming a book illustrator. Léon and his son Paul, who had seconded him since 1900 and who took over in 1923, conducted business with Raymond Roussel until 1933.

contrasts badly with the dull day described in these pages; affectionately". So, does Canterel live in Rousseau's house, Mme Abbattucci's or Louis Ganderax's? Now, the strangest thing of all is that publication of the novel *Locus Solus*, which takes place in Montmorency, was completed by Lemerre on 24 October 1913, one and a half months before the beginning of the serial *A Few Hours in Bougival*. So which one, in Roussel's opinion, was the final version?

The author also sent out copies of his novel on 23 November 1913, before it began to be serialised in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*.^{*} The ordinary copies had an extra introductory page, on different paper, on which was printed: "To my sister the Duchesse d'Elchingen, with great tenderness". This was evidently an afterthought (did he mean that he was extremely proud of his sister's title, or does it mean they had not fallen out, as their mother's will seems to imply?), for the Japanese vellum copies that he sent out on 23 November do not contain this dedication. It was the first and last time in his life that Roussel had a dedication printed at the beginning of one of his books (his posthumous book was to be dedicated, after his death, to his "friend" Charlotte Dufrène, who was mentioned by name).

Locus Solus was apparently also the first of his books of which he had special copies printed on Japanese vellum, which was Lemerre's standard high-quality paper, plus one copy on parchment. Of his previous works (*La Doublure*, *La Vue*, *Chiquenaude*) only *Impressions d'Afrique* had a part of its edition printed on vellum, but this was taken from the typesetting of the 1932 edition, and not from the original. It was also with *Locus Solus* that Roussel started keeping a notebook of dedicatory inscriptions. Finally, it was the first of his parchment books and the first of his manuscripts he had bound by Gruel.

Later, in 1922 and 1923, when *Locus Solus* was put on the stage, the gossip columnists had a field-day. "Many puns were made on *Locus Solus*," wrote Raymond Roussel. "Such as *Loco Solo*, *Blockhouse Solus*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Lacus Salus* (from Pierre Benoit's *Salted Lake*), *Locus Coolus*, *Coolus Solus* (from a play by Romain Coolus), *Blokus Solus*, and so on". He was astonished that one particular pun had not been made "which, it seems to me, deserved an airing, I mean *Logicus Solus*".[†] In an article dated 5 December 1922, a journalist wrote: "For those who understand Latin, *Locus Solus* means 'a lonely place' or 'an isolated area'. Wits have translated it as 'the funny farm'!"

Had Raymond Roussel really learnt Latin, and who could have suggested this title to him, which evokes solitude, isolation, abandon and not only a deserted place, but also the exceptional or unique? If one reader understood this melancholy title, then it was Robert de Montesquiou who, in his novel *La Trépidation*, remarks that Russel (Roussel, clearly) lives in the "Villa Sola". As for Raymond Roussel, he discovered after his book had been published that "there is a lake on the planet Mars called *Solis Lacus*," that is the "lake of the sun".

^{*} To Robert de Montesquiou, Philippe Clément, Émile Duard ("With thanks from the author of *Impressions d'Afrique*") and to Frédéric de Madrazo.

[†] Roussel must have personally attended some of these parodies, for he kept programmes of *Cocus Solus*, by Jean Rieux and Paul Coline at the Grillon, and *Blocus Solus*, Jean Bastia's revue at the Noctambules.

And, sure enough, the character of the scientist Martial Canterel inevitably brings to mind not only Jules Verne, but also the astronomer Camille Flammarion. It is known that, at the time, Roussel read out aloud long passages from *Uranie*.

"*Locus Solus*, a fantastical, amorphous and disconcerting book, in which Raymond Roussel describes in minute detail the bizarre curiosities in the villa of a scientist called Canterel," summed up Armand Praviel.* Canterel shows people round "the immense gardens surrounding his beautiful villa in Montmorency", which contains "several rooms luxuriously transformed into laboratories". It is a Thursday. After seeing the gardens, the visitors are united for "a merry dinner". It was on Sunday 29 July 1923 that Raymond Roussel visited Camille Flammarion at his observatory in Juvisy, which had been set up in an old eighteenth-century inn, near the main road. In the 1880s, Flammarion had had a monumental gate installed, at the top of which was placed a golden star and a Latin motto: "*Ad veritatem per scientiam*". The astronomer was happy to show people around his two-hectare gardens. For example, Adolphe Brisson:†

M. Flammarion [...] guided us through the confines of his gardens. He has turned them into a laboratory; he has placed strangely-shaped instruments there, such as barometers, thermometers, udometers... and what have you [...] Still chatting, we arrive in front of some square cages, like minuscule greenhouses, on which have been daubed every colour of the rainbow.

"This," he proclaimed, "is one of my latest experiments. I wanted to examine the effect of coloured rays on the growth of vegetation. For one year, I have submitted the same plants to different light. Here, a lily has grown under red rays, the one next to it under blue rays, and farther on under green rays. [...]" [This was a "radio-culture" experiment, to study the absorption by plants of the sun's heat, light and actinic rays.]

Before saying farewell, I ask M. Camille Flammarion to show me his "countess's skin"... We have not forgotten that strange adventure, which all of the press reported, that lady reader who bequeathed the skin from her shoulders to the astronomer for the binding of his last book.

"Here it is," he said.

And he placed a beautifully presented volume in my hands. The "countess's skin" was a whitish hue (the colour of parchment), and looked like what is called long-grained morocco; it was soft to the touch, and gave off no odour. On giving him back the book, I noticed the following inscription: *Bound in woman's skin, 1893*; and the coldness of those words chilled me to the bone.

We can also read *Locus Solus* in the light of Francisco Colonna's *Dream of Polyphilus* with its allegorical figures, as has been suggested by Philippe Kerbellec. This approach is all the more interesting when we know that Victor Masséna published learned papers on this subject in 1887 in the *Bulletin du bibliophile*, then in 1889 in the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, and finally a bibliography of *Livres à figures vénitiens* in 1907-9.‡

If Canterel "consecrated his entire life to science", this was thanks to "his great wealth as a bachelor free of responsibilities", like Raymond Roussel himself. It was

* *Polybiblion*, 1914, p.20.

† *Portraits intimes*, 2nd series, 1895.

‡ The garden of Masséna's villa in Nice was in the French style, planted with palm trees; the most interesting thing about it was that it was on the Boulevard des Anglais: it could not have served as model for the hilly gardens in *Locus Solus*. The *Jeu de Locus Solus*, by Gil, R., published by the Cymbalum Pataphysicum (999 copies, 1990 vulg.), shows the possibility of reading *Locus Solus* as a journey of initiation.

Jules Verne who taught us that scientists are generally widowers or bachelors, and if they have any children, then it is generally a daughter of a marriageable age, or rather an adopted daughter promised to a brilliant son, who is also the scientist's close assistant. There is a sort of second-degree consanguinity, and this is precisely what happens to Trézel in *L'Étoile au Front*.

In order to write *Locus Solus*, Roussel chiefly made use of his "evolved procedure" which gave him "prepared equations" (he liked this expression, coined by Robert de Montesquiou) which he had to solve logically. However, the procedure in its early form re-emerges with the word *démoiselle*, which can mean either a "young girl" or a "pile-driver", and is also the name of one of Santos-Dumont's aeroplanes.

Near the Pont de Suresnes is a plaque set up in 1924 to commemorate the first monitored aviation record, which had been established in 1906 by Santos-Dumont, whose *Oiseau de proie* equipped with a 50 HP motor taxied across a flat surface of 200 metres, before taking off and flying a distance of fifty metres at an altitude of three metres (Archdeacon Cup; the record was beaten by Farman the following year). In 1907, Santos-Dumont built his first *Démoiselle*, which was first called *Libellule*, in a fortnight. He tested it in November and December 1907 in the Bagatelle and Issy-les-Moulineaux, and managed a few flights of 200 metres. But it was in September 1909 that he started work again on his *Démoiselle* and that Roussel must have heard about him.

The *Démoiselle* is a tiny aeroplane, the precursor of the U.L.M.* Its wingspan was 5.10 metres and it was 8 metres long. Its total weight when empty, but with its 22-kilo motor included, was 56 kilos; when in flight, with its pilot, it weighed only 110 kilos. But the strangest thing of all is that, in August 1906, Santos-Dumont had already tested his 14 *bis* aircraft in the Bagatelle, and had made it lighter by attaching a balloon to it, just as Canterel does with his pile-driver raised by an airship...

Roussel is supposed to have explained to Pierre Frondaie a working method based on observation which, if it is not the fruit of the latter's imagination, must be a piece of mystification by the former, or else an *a posteriori* realistic justification of his procedure. For example, the idea of the playing-cards containing emeralds is supposed to have come to Roussel when he saw an extremely flat watch: since our grandfathers' fat pocket-watches had evolved into such flat timepieces, nothing ruled out the possibility of being able to place a complex mechanism in something as thin as a playing-card. This is the explanation Frondaie put in Canterel's mouth in Act IV of *Locus Solus*. And it was when thinking about meta (solidified "alcohol") that he had the idea for the solid Sauternes. There is far more of this sort of thing in the *Dictionnaire de Locus Solus* by Patrick Besnier and Pierre Bazantay.

It was mostly when reviewing the stage version of 1922 that critics spoke of the novel from 1914 and it must be admitted that the moment of publication — on the eve of a world war — was unfortunate.

* "*Ultra Léger Motorisé*": an early French flying-machine. [Trans.]

According to Henry Bidou:

The novel, written in a firm, supple and extremely skilful style, inevitably brings to mind certain aspects of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam. It is, of course, obvious that these two minds do not altogether coincide. Villiers is a man of genius, the last of the great idealist poets. And when he amuses himself by having Edison concoct the delicate springs of an automaton, which is quite indistinguishable from a living Eve, then this is better to ridicule manners, appearance and the exterior world. On the other hand, it seems that M. Roussel invents for the pleasure of inventing. His book is nothing but the description of the extraordinary objects which Martial Canterel, a prodigious inventor, has placed in the gardens of his villa in Montmorency. The villa's name is *Locus Solus*, or Solitude.

Or again Édouard Dujardin:

After having seen the play, I wanted to read the novel: I was in for a big surprise. In the novel, there is no trace of that clowning which had so enchanted me in the play. Fundamentally, the spirit is the same, but what became farcical in the play is developed in the novel in a serious, stupefyingly calm manner. It is the spirit of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam or of Edgar Allan Poe; an idea based on logic and science that is then pushed to its extreme with a detailed precision that takes ones breath away.

However, something is lacking, and this will show that I am no flatterer of M. Raymond Roussel; for, after saying how greatly I admired his play, I am going to insult him in the worst possible way for a writer: his writing is styleless. I mean the novel, for I have not read the play and seeing it just once at the theatre does not permit me to form an honest opinion. But the novel *Locus Solus* is one of those books that can be described as being not written — unless making his narration and explanations sound like one long lecture was intentional — for one is left with a final impression at the end of those 450 pages of a sort of mysterious disarray.

It may be that I have misread Raymond Roussel's book; I may have read it too quickly; I shall have to re-examine it; and yet, after all, why not leave that door open? Whatever the case, one thing is certain: the author of *Locus Solus* is no common spirit. I should like to speak of him again later, when I have re-read and thought over his work, and examine what lies behind the strange case of *Locus Solus* — and whether we should devote so much time to an author that appears so suspect on the Boulevard.

Such suspicions did not prevent several readers or spectators from naming their own properties *Locus Solus* in various parts of France. For example, the one reported by Bernard Caburet in the first issue of the *Bulletin de liaison surréaliste* (November 1970) on the Route de Genève in Lyon-Caluire; or that of M. and Mme Guy Montefiore in the suburbs of Paris.

But more is yet to come. "Do you know," Henri Thomas said to me one day on the terrace of the Dôme, "what I found in the local library on the Île d'Houat? A first edition of *Locus Solus*. How did it get there? I wonder if Raymond Roussel visited all the coastal islands and deposited a copy of his book in each one. What's your opinion?" Then, with a malicious sparkle in his eye: "You should drop in on each of the islands in the Channel and the Atlantic to see if there isn't a first edition of *Locus Solus* in their libraries."

Was the author himself completely satisfied with his novel? Until the end of his life Raymond Roussel, who belonged to the last generation for whom recitation was a part of daily life, could quote the entirety of *Locus Solus* by heart. But it is odd that, in July 1933, when he gave a copy to Dr Michele Lombardo, the practitioner at his hotel in Palermo, he recommended that he begin on page thirty-five, “*quello che c’è prima è inutile*”.* This recommendation has nothing to do with the one made to readers of *Impressions d’Afrique*. In this case, it simply means that the reader of *Locus Solus* should, for reasons that remain mysterious, skip the Federal and contra-semen episode.

For the printing of *Locus Solus*, Roussel “went so far as to create a special typographical character, a sort of tonic accent apparently lifted from some Oriental language, to give the correct form to the highly complex name of one of his characters.”† This relates to two letters with diacritical marks that do not appear in the fonts of the Latin alphabet (and are thus unpronounceable in French) for the cat whose name means “plaything” in Siamese: Khóng-dek-lèn.‡ These characters were specially forged. As the name appears sixteen times, and occasionally in several places on the same page, the character could not have been bodged up in the printing-room, but several copies of it must have been produced. Roussel really stopped at nothing! In *Locus Solus* there are also specially engraved musical scores. For the typeface of the title of *Andante a Normande* a Normande font was used, which stands out from the Elzevir used by Lemerre for the rest of the text.

“In the bookshops, no result,” wrote Roussel. And the publisher did not even copyright it!

It is still not clear why the release of *Locus Solus* was delayed. Here is further evidence. On 21 December 1913, Constant Verlot, the deputy for the Vosges, wrote to René Viviani, the minister of public education in Gaston Doumergue’s cabinet:

Dear Minister and Colleague,

I should like to draw your especial attention in favour of M. Raymond Roussel, a writer living at 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace in Neuilly (Seine), a candidate for the award of *Officier de l’Instruction publique*. I warmly recommend M. Roussel to you and I should be particularly happy if he were to obtain this distinction, which he certainly deserves.

M. Roussel has held the *palmes académiques* since [30] January 1907.

The administrative form that Raymond Roussel submitted on 30 January 1914 mentions, under the heading “publications and scientific honours”:

“A play: *Impressions d’Afrique*, performed at the Odéon [!], in Belgium, Holland and the provinces.

“Three volumes published by Alph. Lemerre: *La Doublure*, *La Vue*, *Impressions d’Afrique*.”

* I.e. “What comes before that is useless”.

† Saint-Réal, *Le Gaulois*, 17 February 1923.

‡ An arrangement which even defeats modern computer type-setting. What Roussel wanted, and got, was:

Khóng-dēk-lèn

Not only does he forget *Chiquenaude* — which was admittedly only a booklet — but he fails to mention *Locus Solus* which had already been serialised and had been out in book form for over three months. Why?

The mayor of Neuilly announced his assent on 14 January 1914; the prefecture issued its report on his police record (“clear”) on 19 January; then the prefect of the Seine gave his, rather uncommitted, opinion on 30 January: “Agreed without objection, under condition that his titles are confirmed.” And Roussel was appointed *Officier de l’Instruction publique* by a decree passed on 7 February 1914. In the alphabetical list, his number was 1311; at the time, there were 1505 new *Officiers de l’Instruction publique* and 3897 *Officiers d’académie*.*

Was Roussel waiting for this distinction before having his book distributed? He now started sending out copies. To his family, “to Germaine, with great tenderness”, to Robert de Breteuil, to the Marquise and to the Comtesse de Breteuil, to the Grimprels; to Arthur Meyer, to Louis Diémer, to Eugène Leiris; to his Drs Baratoux, Chéron and Mattin; to Antoine, who was funnily enough then director of the Odéon, to the actors who had performed in *Impressions d’Afrique*; to the writers he admired, to Gabriele D’Annunzio “whose magical name is covered with the glistening of gold and diamonds”, to Edmond Rostand, Jean Richepin, Henri de Régnier, Pierre Loti, Paul Reboux, Lucien Descaves, Louis Ganderax, Étienne Grosclaude, Charles Müller, Marcel Prévost, etc. Georges Courteline, whose signature he admired, had privileged treatment: Roussel inscribed a copy on Japanese vellum “to Georges Courteline, to the brilliant innovator, to the man who has raised more laughter than Molière, with the compliments of an enthusiast who knows *Cochon de Médard* by heart”. Courteline must have been highly flattered.†

PAUL BOURGET, “BRILLIANT AUTHOR OF ANDRÉ CORNÉLIS”

But it was Paul Bourget who received the finest inscription: “to the brilliant author of *André Cornélis*, with the compliments of a deeply affectionate enthusiast”. Roussel was to specify the source of his enthusiasm once more when sending him *La Poussière de Solcils*: “to the author, among so many other masterpieces, of the marvellous chapter 16 of *André Cornélis*”. The novel *André Cornélis* was published in 1887. Does it deserve such praise? In the words of Paul Bourget: “It is the study of mine which is, it seems to me, the least distant from my vision of art. An analytical novel constructed with real data from the exact sciences”. In this novel written in the first person singular, it is not surprising that the narrator, André Cornélis, admits to having read *Hamlet*. This sums up the subject of this (detective) story. André Cornélis is finally on the point of forcing the murderer to admit to his crime in the penultimate chapter, the sixteenth, the one Raymond Roussel so admired.

* Archives nationales, série F17 40289.

† *Cochon de Médard*, a sketch, appears under the title *Cochon de Coco* in Georges Courteline, *Œuvres complètes*, in 14 volumes (vol. II, I, 73), Éd. Bernouard.

It is perhaps because of Paul Bourget (who was born in 1852 in Amiens, where Jules Verne lived and where Roussel did his military service) that Roussel had the idea of writing a verse novel. Bourget had already done so, publishing *Edel, journal d'un artiste* in 1877, the year Roussel was born. It is in fact more of a short story than a novel, with nearly 2,000 lines of verse. This friend of Jean Richepin, Raoul Ponchon, Jules Laforgue and Sapeck wrote:*

And if I was wrong? if that inner flame
That ardour, that crazed thirst for the sublime
My exalted being bending its knee
Before the mystic idol of beauty;
If all that was shadow-play and madness
And if from that mind of shrunken paleness
Nothing emerged that might live forever?

The success of this professional writer, who was hailed as such by Francis Carco in *Montmartre à vingt ans*, soon made others jealous, and not always for the wrong reasons. In 1890, Alfred Vallette wrote: "... with a little more effort he will excel in that extremely arduous art of filling a three-hundred page decimo-octavo volume with the matter of a three-hundred line short story." And we must not forget the lines that Laurent Tailhade devoted to this friend of the Roussel family (in *Les Commérages de Tybalt*, in 1914):

What marked him out most of all, what gave him a sort of originality, was his slavish respect, his fervour and his ecstatic devotion for titles and money. What joy to be a Duke, even Duke of Down-the-Road! And what a glory to avoid spending thirty *sous*! Bourget kept and fulfilled that dream of his spring. If, as Barbey d'Aurevilly affirms, he writes with an eraser, then he adds a purchased title to its rubber. Aristocrats! Rich women! He prostrates himself, admiring their properties, their hunts, their opinions, their bed linen and their valets. And as one might guess, he turns out to be the king of chiropodists!

ROBERT DE MONTESQUIOU

Meanwhile, Roussel had made the acquaintance of Robert de Montesquiou: "Someone spoke to me of him as a crazed, unknown writer of demented books; I sensed a genius, and I was not far from the truth."[†]

It was Montesquiou who made the first, tentative move: he sent Roussel his *Paroles diaprées* collection, published in 1910, which for the first time brought together his verse inscriptions "in the hope of recognising much kindness and in the desire to thank exquisite friendships and friendly sympathies". The title of the sixteenth poem is:

* Well-known poets of the period, although only Laforgue (and to a lesser extent Carco and Richepin) is still widely read. [Trans.]

† *Les Pas effacés*, Mémoires, vol III, p.78. Most of the letters quoted in the following pages come from the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, or the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet; they are undated.

On the copy belonging to the Marquis de Breteuil

*The scenes where you like to live
(For live, after all, we must!)
Amid flowers, with a book
And faultless objects of beauty,*

*Deserve perhaps a reproach:
You exclude the Present.
Our time has more than one master
Gallé can frequent Vincent.*

And the poet finishes thus:

*Let us proclaim, when watched,
The future that extends its hand
In yesterday's novelties
And tomorrow's antiques.*

This poem was addressed to Henri, Marquis de Breteuil, the elder brother of Charles, Comte de Breteuil, who had married Germaine Roussel in 1893. It presumably featured in a copy of Robert de Montesquiou's *Les Hortensias bleus*, published in 1896, as is suggested in this thank-you letter Roussel sent the poet on headed paper from 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, Neuilly:

Tuesday

Dear Sir

Infinite thanks for sending me that copy made so precious by the autograph you attached to it.

A close reading has permitted me to appreciate the superb verses, which our house has inspired in you, better than when I heard them recited. I have sent them on to my sister, who also enjoyed their subtle charm.

Thank you again, dear sir, and accept my humble compliments.

Raymond Roussel.

"Our house" Roussel wrote. In his opinion, the reference was clearly not to the Breteuil *château*, nor to the Breteuils' Paris home on Avenue Marceau, but to the Roussels' mansion on Rue de Chaillot, where Charles de Breteuil died in 1899. Did Robert de Montesquiou confuse Mme Roussel's collections with those of the Marquis de Breteuil? They certainly seemed rather old-hat to him.

While on holiday, Raymond Roussel replied to a letter from Montesquiou with a colour postcard of the waterfalls of the Rhine, with an inset portrait of Goethe and an extract of a letter from Goethe to Schiller:*

* Stamp torn off. Still legible: "14.9.... KO[LN?]" . Certainly prior to 1914.

Thank you, dear sir, for your delightful cards and for crossing the *ts* in *Impressions d'Afrique*. I see that you frequent Saint Moritz, for I remember being there at the same time as you in 1904. My admiration. Raymond Roussel

At all events, Raymond Roussel sent Robert de Montesquiou a copy on Japanese vellum of *Locus Solus* on 23 November 1913:

To the author of *Les Hortensias bleus*. As a token of my deep admiration.*

With his copy, Montesquiou kept this letter from Roussel (Neuilly, undated):

Dear Sir,

A thousand thanks for the priceless allusion made so prominently to my humble *Locus Solus* by your presitigious care in *Gil Blas*.

My book is coming out the day after tomorrow! This is to show you how well timed your revelations concerning it are.

What a magnificent article! And how I loved that defence, even though I greatly prefer fiction to reality. Once again, dear sir, accept my thankful admiration.

Raymond Roussel.

The reference is to the issue of *Gil Blas* of 10 January 1914: so *Locus Solus* must have been in the bookshops "the day after tomorrow", i.e. Monday 12 January 1914. François Le Lionnais remembered having seen large posters on the walls of Paris during his adolescence proclaiming: "Read *Locus Solus*"; but that must have been in 1923, when Raymond Roussel took advantage of the scandal caused by the play to relaunch the novel.

Robert de Montesquiou made the most of this opening and sent Roussel a copy of his *L'Inextricable Graveur: Rodolphe Bresdin*. Roussel thanked him:

Wednesday.

A thousand thanks, dear sir, for your superbly precious gift and the delicately flattering thought you had when raising my Behuliphren from oblivion in your inscription.

What could be more painfully appealing than the life of Rodolphe Bresdin, that great unknown artist! And what a great and noble work of justice you have wrought in this book, where the prestige of your pen gives him the place he deserves!

Once more my thanks for this splendid book that will considerably enrich my library when it joins its illustrious elders and, dear sir, accept my admiration and compliments.

Raymond Roussel.†

Roussel also sent him (or should we say, returned to him?) *La Vuc*, adding a transcription of a passage from another of Robert de Montesquiou's books, *La Divine Comtesse*,‡ in which we find another pen-holder:

To the author of *L'Inextricable Graveur*

With the compliments of an author who positively attempted in this book to make three engravings with words.

14 December 1913

Raymond Roussel

* No. 560 in the sale of Robert de Montesquiou's library, p.184 of the catalogue (26 April 1923). This copy (which does not contain the additional dedication to Roussel's sister) and the autograph letter attached are today in the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet.

† Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet.

‡ Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. *La Divine Comtesse*, "study of Mme de 'Castiglione", preface by Gabriele D'Annunzio, Goupil, 1913.

"... blinking eyes, in that desperate effort which Swiss pen-holders force from our vision when we try to admire, at the top of their perforated ivory, or their sculpted wood, a minuscule landscape..."

It is fairly certain that Robert de Montesquiou visited Raymond Roussel in Neuilly in November or December 1913, before his essay on *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus* appeared in *Gil Blas*. This is how it ends:

One day, I went to see M. Raymond Roussel to speak to him concerning his extraordinary imaginings which, with their exact art employed for factitious combinations, remind me of the last drawings made by Grandville when he no longer went out...

I wondered if I was going to find myself faced with a Dr Faust, updated by the Angel of Eccentricity, and who was going to ask me to dine, certain that, after having listened to a few exquisite variations on the theme of the Morgue, I would touch none of the food. I discovered a young man, who was extremely polite, charming and even attentive, wearing grey slippers; like Spinoza, and buttons of tree agate.

When I had questioned my host concerning the relative truth of his historical and scientific affirmations, he rather reassured me by replying that everything in his books was pure invention, and that he worked on them for two hours every morning. And I could not stop myself from thinking, when I remembered how many extraordinary things they contained, that these two hours were well spent.

Then my host showed me a blue cedar, the colour of Balkis's hair, which he had just had transported, at great expense, over the railings which surround his estate so that it could be transplanted there once it had matured.

His dog, a sort of miniature mastiff, low on its legs and with a triangular head, at the same time good-natured and terrifying because of the tobacco-less briar pipe clamped between its fangs, seemed, for that reason, infinitely more sociable to me than the one in *Beni-bouffe-toujours*.

No sooner had Roussel read this essay than he wrote a thank-you letter to the Comte:

[Neuilly] Saturday evening [10 January 1914].

Dear Sir,

How abashed I was to read the fine article that you wrote about me in *Gil Blas*! I feel so unworthy of such high praise that I almost want to attach a reproach to my thanks.

How can I tell you to what extent I enjoyed the article itself, while struggling to forget whom it was about, because it is so admirable in the structure of each paragraph, its every line is "signed". How frighteningly erudite you are and how did you manage to find such astounding verve when speaking of such poor matter?

I found the Angel of Eccentricity, "Balkis's hair", the "grey slippers like Spinoza", "Grandville's drawings", the Baudelaire quotation and many other colourful and unexpected turns of phrase stupefying and delightful.

For the first time, I feel that I was right to compose my books, since they have brought about the blossoming of such beautiful things.

Another warm "thank-you", dear sir, and accept my admiration and gratitude.

Raymond Roussel.*

* B.N. Manuscripts Department.

Then, five days later:

[Neuilly] Thursday [15 January 1914].

Dear Sir,

On Saturday evening, as well as writing to you I wrote to Monsieur Pierre Mortier to thank him for the place of honour he gave in *Gil Blas* to the fine article which you were kind enough to write about me. I need not tell you that, so far as I know, all those who have seen this prestigious leader have unanimously and warmly applauded it. In fact, is it not true that, the worse the case is, the more the talent of the advocate must be admired?

Accept, dear sir, my thankful affection.

Raymond Roussel.*

And the two writers began to exchange postcards. Roussel pretended to be more interested in the photographs on the front than in the questions Montesquiou asked him. His were illustrated by a photo of the villa in Neuilly:

[Postmarked: Paris, 9 May 1914.]

Dear Sir,

What a delicious and amusing time I have spent reading your cards, which overflow with verve and wit!

What is more, they have enriched my collection of d'Artagnanalia! I thus owe you a double thank-you to which I add my admiring gratitude.

Raymond Roussel.†

Montesquiou could not understand why *Locus Solus* was late:

[Postmarked: Paris, ... 1914.]

My thanks for all the charming and precious things you tell me. This delay which surprises you was caused by the serialisation of my book in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*. Thank you, too, for the illustrated side of your cards, since I am a fan of Dumas *père*. Your grateful admirer,

Raymond Roussel.‡

So why had he insisted on publishing *Locus Solus* in *Lc Gaulois du Dimanche*? Montesquiou's patience finally paid off when Roussel replied:

[Postmarked: Paris, 16 May 1914]

Dear Sir — Alas, my books do not sell, there is only one way for me to try and procure a few readers for them, and that is by publishing them in a newspaper. With books of this sort, I have little choice... Nobody wants them... They can pass off only in a publication lacking in volume such as this one... lost amongst the rest!

Your highly grateful admirer.

Raymond Roussel.§

* *Ibid.*

† *Ibid.*

‡ *Ibid.*

§ *Ibid.*

The "chief of sweet scents"¶ then started sending flowers... unless this undated letter precedes the series of postcards:

¶ A reference to Montesquiou's verse collection *Chef des odeurs suaves*. [Trans.]

Saturday.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your beautiful and kind letter.

I shall certainly plant a cutting of *Pittosporum* in Biarritz. If few plants flourish on that windy beach, then your last line is both charming to the ear and bears precious botanical information.

My sister is not in Paris at the moment and I have not been able to speak to her of your kind offer. But I am certain that she would be delighted to have the autograph you suggest sending her.

With all my best literary thoughts and admiration,

Raymond Roussel.*

Whoops! *Pittospora* are shrubs whose white flowers give off a scent of jasmine, but they are grown indoors or in greenhouses, where they must spend at least the winter; certainly not on a beach exposed to sea breezes where nothing grows! Raymond Roussel had deeply wounded Montesquiou by his inattention. He apologised for this mistake in a postcard, whose stamp has been torn off (it is a colour postcard printed in Neuchâtel, depicting Monte Rosa and the Gorner glacier):

Dear Sir,

Thank you a thousand times for correcting my mistake regarding the *Pittosporum*. There will soon be in Neuilly, near my blue cedar, a few cuttings of that plant the name of which is so pretty that I regret not having put it in my Behuliphruen.

My admiring compliments,

Raymond Roussel.†

However, Roussel did not seem to be particularly interested in the park which surrounded his house, and which was tended by three gardeners: "Your gardens are magnificent," Pierre Frondaie told him when visiting him for the first time. "So people say", was Roussel's off-hand reply. He drove through them without looking.‡

Roussel's postcards were addressed to Montesquiou at the Palais Rose, in Vésinet. Montesquiou wrote§ how he "discovered this near neighbour after his departure for Neuilly". Roussel thus never visited the Pavillon des Muses which was, like his own villa, on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, nor did he attend the parties the Comte gave there until leaving for America in 1903. It was Montesquiou that visited Raymond Roussel on Boulevard Richard-Wallace, as has already been stated and as he repeated in his *Mémoires*:

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet.

† B.N. Manuscripts Department.

‡ Mme. Frondaie.

§ *Les Pas effacés*, *Mémoires*, vol III, Émile-Paul, 1923.

¶ *Ibid.*

He was not a very pleasant man; but how could he have been? His soul was constructed like one of his characters, who make mosaics from teeth and who have scenes acted out by galvanised corpses. His very presence gave off a freezing, or rather pneumatic feeling; and, when I saw him running in his garden, followed by his poodle [?] smoking an empty pipe, I prayed God that they should not meet themselves, as Shelley did, for they would have been frightened.¶

Not only did Robert de Montesquiou come from the same milieu as Roussel, but he was also famous for having been the model for J.-K. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* (this was contested by Edmond de Goncourt: "If there is something a touch cracked about him, this gentleman is never caricatural, his suavity is pure distinction"), for Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901) and elements of Marcel Proust's Charlus. He has also recently been spotted in the hen-yard of *Chantecler* (1910) as a peacock; he himself published a collection of poems in 1901 called *Les Paons* [*The Peacocks*]).

Even though, ten years later in 1924, Roussel wrote to Willy saying that he had "had nothing to do with it" and that Montesquiou was the "sole author" of the words attributed to him in his novel *La Trépidation*, it does seem that Roussel visited the Comte. In fact:

Dear Sir,

I am awaiting a sign from you. What a great artistic pleasure it will be for me to visit your marvellous Palais Rose. Your thankful admirer.

Raymond Roussel.*

In July 1914, then? War broke out on 1 August. Whatever the case, Montesquiou included Roussel among the "forty incorruptible heads" that exchange "ultra-violet speech" in chapter IV of *La Trépidation*, under the name Edmond Russel. This passage also features Jean Lorrain, Anatole France, the artist Sem, Dr Jacquet — who presumably did not all meet one another at the Comte's house during the same period — and Robert de Montesquiou himself, "as unpleasant as ever".

It is Dr Jacquet who gives "Russel" his first chance for a sally:

"Admire the resistance of the fashionable. What has been rightly termed the 'rage for candles' (candles have become as electric as blankets) is a guarantee of long life, no less. Those inveterate stars of dining out are no longer a group, but a troop, always ready to leap into the gap..."

"You could even say, into the gap-teeth..." Edmond Russel murmured.

The dreadful jest passed by unnoticed.

After one of these "fashionable" people had remarked that some "lady spectators, inconsolable because they were not on the boards," were waiting for the interval to be able to show off the colours of their hats and dresses that matched that day's show:

"Forgive," said Russel, "an observation that is rather like M. de Bargenton's fits of laughter, which Balzac described as being 'buried cannonballs waking up'. What makes me want to risk this fine reproach is the hope that you will derive some awful pleasure from hearing me recount the strangest exhibition that I have ever recorded, when it comes to that prestige of artificial things which we were discussing earlier.

"This proof, of the ocular sort, was given to me by a young lady, whose unfortunate existence she eked out by giving lessons to a slightly older blind man. I do not know what she taught him, but I think I know what he wanted to teach her when he approached too close to her

* Postcard. Postmark 6.1914,
B.N. Manuscripts Department.

during a demonstration. Since she was virtuous and he lacked audacity, she pretended not to understand, but could not stop herself from suffering under the gaze of her pupil's two glass eyes, which had been placed on a cornice before the lesson, and which seemed to be accusing that maidenly teacher of refusing to cast some imitation light by granting a little happiness.

We should like to know if this suggestive proof of the “prestige of artificial things” was really Raymond Roussel's. But surely the most important point is that Robert de Montesquiou decided to attribute it to him. However, in a letter to Willy, Roussel denied the authenticity of the following exchange of words:

“Do not make fun of Madame Foutriquet,” said Gem [Sem], “if all you see in her is a manifestation of *the seated locomotive* and *sprung snobbery*; in my opinion she is a sort of inferior demonality. She occupies the centre of a circle of tea-drinking larvae, who owe her something for her white-pointed Pé-ko [China tea]. It is then that she kisses her Charrière *ergot* [an orthopaedic instrument].”

It was then that Russel, who had remained stubbornly silent since his awful pun, hazarded his luck on another one (which I leave you to judge). He said: “So what shall be her motto? Descartes's famous affirmation: *cogito, ergo sum*.”

In *La Trépidation*, Montesquiou completed the portrait he had started in *Lcs pas effacés*:

As for you, Russel [...], ask for nothing, or I shall get angry. One must not be over-ambitious, one really cannot have everything.

You have the *Villa Sola*, a blue cedar, pearl-grey hortensias, a dog that smokes, steaming coffee, valets with loops and frogging, rare cufflinks, beaver-skin shoes, expensive rushes, shooting-prizes, and a list of those of your friends whose tics you reproduce in front of your triptych mirror, not to mention that economical advantage of not desiring other objects that tie one down and are ruinous. The result is that you are badly furnished, but you apologise for this with impertinent grace pronouncing phrases such as: “I advise you to look at nothing in my house, for I think nothing is any good; that said, I am not sufficiently expert to be sure.” To speak like that, one needs a private income of at least eight hundred thousand francs a year, which certainly helps.

I was forgetting a town house in Parc Monceau [the Bois de Boulogne], just by the lakeside, and a potted Pittosporum. Finally, I have been told that, like the Emperor Verus, who never wore the same buskins twice, you never put back on the same collar, which shows your scorn for laundries, your preference for shirt-makers and your respect for yourself. I suppose then that you do not go and demand from wasteful Providence that you might *write like Georges Ohnet*; but that is precisely what you have dared ask, since having decided to give yourself over to letters, you also *wish to please*. But it is important to set oneself reasonable limits [...].

Listen to me, Russel [...]. Do not become over-virtuous, that would perhaps mean that you would obtain from God the Father the gift of *Georges Ohnet's* style*.

* Author of melodramatic novels and plays. [Trans.]

Robert de Montesquiou's description is confirmed by André Arnyvelde who, in *Fantasio* of 15 June 1911, relates a visit to Neuilly:

The man is charming. M. Raymond Roussel, when he is reached after passing fifteen (!) servants dressed in black with white ties, appears as someone elegant, but without affectation, rather thin, but with his head slightly thrown back, as though to listen more attentively. It is a remarkably attenuated head, with a bony chin and thin nose.

We should have liked to have published his portrait, but since the age of four [surely *nineteen*?], M. Raymond Roussel has not been photographed, or has not wanted to be.

Apparently his huge body of staff was not enough to reassure him as, on 20 July 1914, Roussel engaged “La Vigilante”, a French company that specialised in security and protection, to make four rounds of his house on Boulevard Richard-Wallace between nine-thirty in the evening and five in the morning.

This was the moment Rachilde chose to report on *Locus Solus* in the *Mercure de France*:

I should have liked to have been able to read M. Roussel’s book (which is certainly no novel). For I have not forgotten with what good grace its author gave me several seats for his eccentric play, *Impressions d’Afrique*, two or three years ago. But in vain did I try on several occasions to read it through to the end; each time a powerful migraine proved to me that there are limits to human strength. Is M. Roussel a joker, a humorist (and a mediocre one, at that) who has not sufficiently renewed his manner and inspiration? Those who have not forgotten the whalebone statue on rails of veal lights in *Impressions d’Afrique* will understand my concern.

Did Roussel have time to read this notice? This issue of the *Mercur de France* came out on 1 August 1914! When mobilisation was announced, Roussel was in Deauville (or Le Touquet?) with Charlotte Dufrène whom he forced, along with his Spanish teacher, Carrière his secretary, his mistress’s chambermaid, Paul his own valet and his chauffeur, to attend a series of lectures on philosophical thought which were being given to him by a professor from Bordeaux.

“A WARRIOR”

Roussel was thirty-seven, and thus could not be attached to an active unit. He was sent to the 19th squadron of the Army Service Corps in Paris, which he joined on 3 August, having arranged an appointment with his lecturer at the Ritz for a fortnight later. He left with only his cane, gloves, two handkerchiefs and a pair of socks, though Eugène Leiris did buy him a haversack. Like everyone else, Raymond Roussel was sure that the war would be over in three weeks.

He entrusted Charlotte Dufrène to the Leiris family, and she took the train to the southwest along with Juliette Jannet, the eldest of the Leiris children, whose daughter played with the contents of her bag during the journey. Michel and his brother Pierre also travelled down with their mother to take refuge in Biarritz, but

neither they nor Charlotte Dufrène would stay in the Villa Chaslon-Roussel.

Biarritz was a destination not just for refugees but also for shirkers. Rosemonde Gérard applied to Louis Barthou, the eternal deputy of the Basses-Pyrénées and eight times minister between 1894 and 1914, and got her young lover, Tiarko Richepin, the son of the Academician Jean Richepin, sent to Biarritz while her own son Maurice was engaged as a nurse in the Dames-de-France hospital.

But the Roussel family never avoided doing its duty. In 1914, Germaine, the Duchesse d'Elchingen, with her friends the Baronne de Langlade and the Vicomtesse de Jonghe, worked as nurses in Biarritz at the Pavillon Henri IV; then later, in 1915, at the Deauville casino, which had temporarily been converted into a hospital.

On 1 September, Raymond was attached to the mobile unit of the 13th Artillery Regiment in Vincennes.

That same month, his nephew Robert de Breteuil, who was twenty and had just left the military academy at Saint-Cyr, was killed during the Battle of the Marne. He was one of those the generals sent off to die in full dress-uniform, white gloves and plumed shakos. For a long time, Raymond Roussel refused to believe he was dead and waited for news. His sister was distraught: she had lost the son of the only man she had ever loved.

Eugène Leiris continued to look after Raymond Roussel: for example, he advised him to smoke a pipe to ward off the miasma while burying the dead... But did Roussel really bury corpses? By December, he already had other things on his mind, and sent his stockbroker a sealed envelope with the following message written on it:

Would Monsieur Eugène Leiris be so kind as to place this envelope in his strong box.

10 December 1914

Raymond Roussel

It contained a twenty-three page document in two sections, typed with a violet-coloured ribbon. The title is *Flio*, followed by the number 1, which has raised doubts as to whether it is a title, or else the abbreviation of *folio 1*. "Nothing in the text justifies the title FLIO. Would it have been justified later? There is no indication," wrote Jean Ferry. On the other hand, *Flio* is a name that Roussel had already considered giving to Naïr in *Impressions d'Afrique*, to Mopsus the cockerel and a young shepherd in *Locus Solus*, to Oberthur the astrologer, or else to a magnificent bird that had been trained to strangle Philip of Macedonia (or maybe Alexander the Great).

This envelope was not the last one. The real reasons behind sending these papers to his stockbroker, to other safes and other hands, will probably come to light when Roussel's manuscripts, which have already been deciphered by Annie Angrémy, have been properly studied. Should we infer from this first consignment that Roussel thought sufficiently highly of the first draft of *Flio* that he wanted Eugène Leiris to

deposit it securely? Yet subsequently he forgot it. Jean Ferry supposed that this text must have been dictated, which would explain several mistakes (the typist wrote “*l’air nouvelle*” for “*l’ère nouvelle*”, “*formant*” for “*format*”, etc.) and the sentence: “This is only a plan”, which Roussel had no need to write for himself.

And yet this would seem to have been one of the author’s habits, for in the manuscript (but not the typescript) of *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, there are indications of where the “*Citations documentaires*” can be found in issues of *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, where they first appeared, and, at the end, this remark: “This parenthesis is addressed to the printer.”

Flio contains at least one piece of autobiographical information. Cros—, the main character, is “informed by a letter from his printer that his evocative work of poetry concerning the masterpieces of B—iens’s sculptural art had been sold until the total [*sic*] exhaustion of its first edition.” Then, in brackets: “The printer invited him to come and give him any possible instructions regarding a new edition.”

“Closing the volume, then pushing it aside on his desk, Cros— wrote a letter to the printer at his address accepting this invitation and telling him that, given their complex nature, he wanted to present his projects to him in person. (Say somewhere where he intends to give the printer an annotated manuscript for the resetting.)”

Thus, Cros—, like Roussel, had his books privately printed. It is not a publisher that suggests a new edition, but a printer; and Cros— intends to annotate his manuscript himself and give the printer any necessary instructions in person. Cros— is not Roussel, but he had the same preoccupations.

Roussel also mentions in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* an episode “written immediately after *Locus Solus* and interrupted by the mobilisation of 1914, in which there is much talk of Voltaire and of a place full of fireflies”; he adds that this manuscript “might deserve being published”. This note allows us to date the 67-page manuscript *L’Allée aux lucioles* [*The Alley of Fireflies*], which has since been re-discovered, but unless there exists a later version, its unfinished state hardly makes it “deserve” presentation to the general public.

In his letters, the soldier displayed excellent morale:

[Postcard: “Correspondence to the Armies of the Republic”, addressed to M. Eugène Leiris, 8, Rue Michel-Ange, Paris. Postmark: 6.1.1915.]

Dear Friend,

How touched I was by your affectionate best wishes for the new year! In turn, I address you mine with all my heart.

I do not have to tell you my most ardent desire; it is to have news of Robert [de Breteuil] as soon as possible. As for you, dear friend, I hope that all those who are close to you are spared, that this terrible war finishes in time so that you will not have the sorrow of being separated from your son.

To you and your family, my most affectionate and grateful thanks.

Raymond Roussel.

[Postcard: drawing by Georges Scott showing a French soldier writing on a drum; addressed to Jacques, Pierre and Michel Leiris.]

27 February 1915.

My dear lads,

I was deeply touched by your kind thoughts. While waiting to be able to thank you viva [voce] when the division of Germany has been achieved, that is to say very soon, I address you a thousand affectionate memories.

Raymond Roussel.

He also sent their sister Juliette a postcard signed “a warrior”.

Roussel’s service record contradicts Michel Ney’s remarks: “He wasn’t brave, you know!... He wasn’t a brave man at all... During the ’14-’18 war, he hid out in Châlons-sur-Marne.” But the camp in Châlons was no place to hide out! His presence there is confirmed by an inscription in a copy of *Impressions d’Afrique* that belonged to Marcel Jean: “to André Houry / given in memory of our / meeting in Châlons / during the Great War / Raymond Roussel / January 1927”.

“Yes, I was in the war [he told Roger Vitrac]. I was in Châlons (he smiled) where I drove a motor-car. We were bombed frequently. Bombings are strange, don’t you think? Very strange. So can you tell me why Reims, which was bombed more than any other town, had the largest cellars in the world?”

Charlotte Dufrène would not believe that he had driven a car, let alone, as has been reported, that he was a general’s chauffeur. “Him drive a car? He couldn’t even open a bottle!” She also claimed that he had been evasive when asked about what he was doing. As she had no news, Roussel being, according to her, always very “lazy” when it came to writing letters, she asked the Duchesse d’Elchingen, who curtly told her that her brother was doing his duty and that there was consequently no need to worry about him. And, laughing, Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris in 1961 that she did not really know what Roussel had been up to during the war, but that he had been a soldier...

According to Robert Desnos, in *L’Intransigent* of 7 August 1933:

During the war, his publisher M. Lemerre met him in the field at Châlons. He was counting oil drums. This cataclysm stupefied him. His logic-loving mind could not fathom such an event.

When asked what had struck him during those tragic years, he replied, with great profundity: “I had never seen so many men!”

It is true that Roussel did seem to have some free time in his transport unit. He himself mentioned a “work in verse begun in 1915”:

“At that time, I had returned to poetry, which I had abandoned many years before, and the work in question was none other than *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, which I was to complete only in 1928 [and publish four years later].

“It is in fact scarcely credible how much time is required to compose such verses.”

We can also be sure that this lover of entertainment must have attended the army theatre behind the lines. He later recalled a great actress who was visiting the trenches. There is no use trying to name her, even if she might have been Sarah Bernhardt: this would simply be a pretext for hearing an echo of her presence in the title *L'Étoile au Front* [*The Star on the Forehead*], but also *The Star at the Front*].

He continued writing to the Leiris family. To Michel and Pierre to thank them for their new-year's card:

7 January 1916.

Many thanks and many affectionate wishes for 1916 before the end of which there will be a Franco-Russian frontier!

Raymond Roussel.

To their mother, who had just lost her brother:

Tuesday

Dear Madam,

Monsieur Leiris has told me of the great sorrow that has just afflicted you, and I want to tell you how much I share your and his grief.

This blow that has struck you in your closest affections is all the more terrible in that it is an addition to the anxiety which the war is causing you regarding your two dear children. How much courage you will need to bear such trials and how much I would have liked to be able to express my sympathy in person during these cruel days you are going through.

Please relay my words to Monsieur Leiris, and please accept, dear Madam, my respect and my deepest and profoundest condolences.

Raymond Roussel.

On 1 June 1916, he was transferred to the 5th Transport Squadron, stationed in Fontainebleau, then, on 21 September 1916, to the 20th Transport Squadron in Versailles. It is between these two dates that we must place a postcard written to Eugène Leiris and showing "The Bossons glacier. The grotto and ladder". This excursion seems to have been made during a period of leave on 27 July 1916:

Dear Friend,

Until now I have been lucky with the weather and been able to make magnificent excursions. Madame Dufrène and I have spoken much about you.

What news of your warrior [Jacques, Eugène Leiris's eldest son]? With all my heart.

Raymond Roussel.

In March 1917, he was on leave in Paris; it was during this stay that he was photographed in uniform with his nephew Michel Ney. His sister Germaine wrote on the photo at the bottom: "Michel and Raymond, 1917 (war)". He also left another sealed envelope with his stockbroker, with the written inscription: "Would Monsieur Leiris be so kind as to place this envelope in his strong-box. Raymond



"Michel and Raymond, 1917 (war)."

Roussel. 6 March 1917." It contained four typewritten pages of a first draft of Canto I of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.

With remarkable constancy, Roussel went through the four years of the war with the rank of... second-class soldier! He summed up his campaigns in his application for the *Légion d'honneur*: "Mobilised at the outbreak of war and constantly at the front, except for the last six months spent in various hospitals because of jaundice and a particularly violent case of scarlet fever." It was, indeed, in March 1918 that he contracted jaundice, then, from 5 July to 14 August, that he was treated for scarlet fever by Dr A. Florand at the Val-de-Grâce hospital. On 11 July, during this hospitalisation, Dr Jean-Charles Roux (39, Boulevard Raspail, Paris) sent him a certificate stating that he had treated him in 1911 and 1912 "for dyspeptic disorders, causing chronic gastric difficulties resulting in a considerable loss of weight and aggravating the nervous disorders that the patient had been suffering from for some time". Two weeks later, on 27 July, Dr Janet in turn certified that he had treated Raymond

Roussel "during the years that preceded the war and on several occasions in recent years during leave. For many years, this patient has manifested serious neuropathic disorders with mental depression, obsessions, anxiety and phobias associated with food". As Janet was less precise than Dr Roux, we still do not know exactly when he started treating his "poor little patient". Nor do we know if these gastric problems aggravated his nervous disorders, or the other way round, since these two "specialists" had diametrically opposed opinions.

On 4 September, Constant-Eugène Leiris declared himself to be Raymond Roussel's "guardian" and wished him to stay at his house during his convalescence. In October, he was still showing signs of asthenia, and, on 2 November, his convalescence was extended for another two weeks. Thus it is likely that he was with the Leiris family when he heard that the Armistice had been signed on 11 November 1918. He was transferred to the 1st Engineer Regiment (20th Battalion) in Versailles on 15 December and put on unlimited demobilisation leave on 13 February 1919. His "campaigns against Germany" can thus be summed up as follows: *on the front*, from 3 August 1914 to 26 August 1918; *on the home front*, from 27 August to 11 November 1918.

He was invited to attend the victory parade on the Champs-Élysées on 14 July

1919. As a war veteran, he joined the Union Nationale, Neuilly-sur-Seine section, and, as a benefactor, paid a sumptuous subscription of 3000 francs. He also contributed 500 francs to the Champagne war memorial. And, as Roussel never missed out on a chance to become decorated, he accepted the French commemorative medal of the Great War and the Inter-Allies' Victory medal. Charlotte Dufrène kept the travelling alarm-clock he brought back from the army up until her death.

Throughout the entire war, Raymond Roussel never swayed from strict dress regulations; he never had a single extravagant outfit made and simply wore the coarse blue uniform issued to him. He thus noticed that the same clothes could last a long time and, while he had been very fussy about his wardrobe before hostilities, his habits now changed; for example, he had his clothes dyed black and wore suede top-boots that soon became absolutely "hideous".

"After beating all the records for elegance," he told Charlotte Dufrène, "I am now going to beat all the records for inelegance."

PAGES CHOISIES

But Roussel did bring something back from the war. After having deposited in his stockbroker's safe at 26, Avenue de l'Opéra *Flio*, which he then forgot about, he began writing *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in 1915 and deposited a first draft in 1917. In 1918, he published a volume of *Pages Choiesies*, a selection of passages from *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*. At least, that is the year that figures on the cover and the title-page. Since we lack Lemerre's archives, and the printer's registration simply carries the number 5773, we can say no more about the date: there was no announcement in the *Bibliographie de la France*, nor is there any trace of a copyright declaration. The back cover lists the titles of the "*Bibliothèque contemporaine*" (among others, *La Doublure*, *La Vuc*, *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*), including five collections of "Tales from the Trenches" written by a "group of combatants", the illustrated covers of which had long been one of the choice ornaments in the publisher's shop window in Passage Choiseul.

When, and above all why, did Roussel decide to have *Pages Choiesies* published? In Châlons, had he had the opportunity to talk to his "readers"? This edition was certainly directed at a public "uninitiated" into the art of Raymond Roussel. In this way, it features only the second part of *Impressions d'Afrique*; and from *Locus Solus*, only the tales separated by subtitles (The Federal, Hello, The Veteran, Danton's Head, The Cartesian Divers, The Resurrected, Cyrus's Golden Cup, Paracelsus's Placets, Noël and Mopsus), without their introductory descriptions!

Even though *Pages Choiesies* was apparently even less successful than his other books, it does seem to be the one that led Jean Cocteau* and André Gide to

* "In 1918, I rejected R. Roussel since he might have put me under a charm for which I knew no antidote." (*Opium*)

discover Roussel.

When he heard that Gide was interested in him, Roussel sent him, in 1925, a copy of *L'Étoile au Front* on Japanese vellum:*

to André Gide,

a token of my great admiration and my gratitude for the pride I felt when I heard that he had read passages from *Impressions d'Afrique* to Jacques-Émile Blanche.

R.R.

André Gide then replied with a letter, from which Roussel published extracts in his booklet of quotations:

13 May 1925.

But, dear Monsieur Roussel, it is not only to J.-É. Blanche that I have read out long passages from your *Impressions d'Afrique* and from *Locus Solus* — at a time when, I think, you had very few readers.

Your “*pages choisies*”, which had just been published and which your publisher (or yourself?) was good enough to send me, remained on my desk for a long time. I hardly thought about opening it, since I scarcely expected anything good from the company of “*Fac et Spera*”. Then, suddenly I was lost, out of my depth in the Gulf Stream of your dream, a spring of youth in which I was merely fifteen. “Then, like a sleepwalker, Fogar stood up and entered the sea.”

I first read you out aloud that very evening to my family (I was in the country at the time). When I was back in Paris a few months later, I relayed my wonderment to Mademoiselle [Adrienne] Monnier and to the small group of young poets that gravitate around her at [7,] Rue de l'Odéon — a wonderment that they were soon to share. Then, to many others...

Farewell. Attentively yours,

André Gide.

We can see the role of initiator that André Gide had allotted himself when it came to André Breton, Louis Aragon and their friends. Jacques-Émile Blanche, who was an acquaintance of Raymond Roussel's, remembered Gide reading aloud to him the Fogar passage from *Impressions d'Afrique*.

After the 1918 Armistice, Raymond Roussel started travelling once more, sometimes with Charlotte Dufrène, and his trace can be found in Carthage in 1919.

It is about the same time that we can situate his meeting with Eugène Canseliet,† which would justify an alchemical interpretation that is in no way contradicted by Raymond Roussel's posthumous work. It was in the Hôtel de Lesseps, 11, Avenue Montaigne, where Ferdinand de Lesseps had died in 1894, that after the war (Eugène Canseliet affirmed that he had bought *La Poussière de Soleils* “eight years later, in 1927”) Raymond Roussel apparently frequented a “small circle of initiates”, which notably had included the sons Bertrand (killed in 1918) and Paul, the painter Julien Champagne, Fulcanelli's illustrator, and Eugène Canseliet, who was surprised to hear Champagne call Roussel his “class mate”. (Both were born in 1877, and were in the same year group; perhaps they spent at least part of the 1914-18 war in the

* He also sent him copies of *La Poussière de Soleils* (“With the compliments of a great admirer who puts a high price on the lines quoted below”) and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (“his very great and very grateful admirer”).

† As reported by Eugène Canseliet to Philippe G. Kerbellec, *Raymond Roussel, Au Cannibale affable*. In a letter dated 31 March 1948 to Jean Ferry, André Breton says that Fulcanelli is “a pseudonym which probably conceals M. Canseliet”.

same territorial reserve.)

On the other hand, we must not forget this reflection made by Michel Leiris in 1986, who never believed in “Roussel the initiate”:

... he lacked that lucidity, he had no philosophical project. He was, and not in a pejorative sense, innocent. [...] He was not at all mystical. Breton was wrong when he believed that he was an initiate. He was a positivist and suffered as a result.

In 1919, Raymond Roussel had other things on his mind. On 27 December, he wound up his long negotiations with Pierre Frondaie, another admirer of Edmond Rostand who perhaps introduced them to one another, by signing a contract for a dramatisation of his novel *Locus Solus*, which he drew up himself on stamped paper.

PIERRE FRONDAIE, ADAPTOR OF ROUSSEL'S NOVELS

Pierre Frondaie (1884-1948), seven years younger than Roussel, was to become one of the inter-war years' most successful dramatists. He specialised in adapting famous novels: in 1920 he staged Maurice Barrès's *Colette Baudouche* and Anatole France's *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. He also had his own “particular ideas” about dramatising novels, which he confided that year to Gaston Sorbets of *La Petite Illustration*:

The art begins in development and above all in expression. In particular, if a novelist then a dramatist tell the same story, they are like a painter and a sculptor who reproduce the same woman's face. The originality of each is evident.

It is clear that Roussel did not think that the failure of the staged version of *Impressions d'Afrique* was due to the novel, but to his own shortcomings as a dramatist. He thus chose the simplest solution: give the job of writing a new version to the best adaptor then working. Indeed, he did not initially think of dramatising *Locus Solus*.

A press cutting dated 22 October 1922 gives an imaginary first meeting between the author and Frondaie: “‘What you want me to do is beyond payment... I would need one month's work and... 200,000 francs,’ cried Frondaie, no doubt to put the pest off. ‘But of course, here's a cheque!’ his visitor calmly replied.”

Pierre Frondaie settled for less, if we believe the contract and its codicils:

The following has been agreed between the undersigned: M. Raymond Roussel, a man of letters, dwelling at 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace in Neuilly-sur-Seine, having requested M. Pierre Frondaie, dwelling in Paris at 14, Rue de Miromesnil, to adapt his novel entitled *Impressions d'Afrique*, M. Pierre Frondaie has accepted, having familiarised himself with the

book, and has agreed to write the play. Since the novel presents a quite particular philosophical aspect, M. Frondaie has insisted that there be a suitable guaranteed income from the work he will undertake. For this reason, M. Roussel has guaranteed a minimum of fifty thousand francs royalties, payable in the following way: fifteen thousand francs on signature of the present contract; ten thousand francs on delivery of the first act; ten thousand francs on delivery of the subsequent act; fifteen thousand francs on delivery of the end of the play. This fifty thousand francs will be repayable to M. Raymond Roussel as of the first performance out of the royalties, it being understood that if such royalties do not reach fifty thousand francs, M. Frondaie will be held in no way responsible for the difference. If the play should bring in more than fifty thousand francs' royalties, M. Frondaie will receive all of the subsequent royalties only until the overall sum of seventy-five thousand francs has been reached. After that figure, the royalties will be shared, half for M. Raymond Roussel and half for M. Pierre Frondaie. M. Pierre Frondaie will have the right to substitute for *Impressions d'Afrique* another novel by M. Raymond Roussel entitled *Locus Solus*. In any case, even if the play has been drawn only from one episode, the posters and programmes will say that it has been adapted from one of his novels.

Signed, in duplicate, in Paris on 27 December 1919.

Read and approved
Pierre Frondaie

Read and approved
Raymond Roussel.

Was this contract strictly adhered to? Roussel seems to have wanted a fresh version of *Impressions d'Afrique*; Frondaie claimed the right to dramatise *Locus Solus*, or even just one episode of it. Pierre Frondaie was sufficiently professional to be able easily to persuade Roussel that the double failure of his play would be fatal. It was essential to produce a new one. As for the financial conditions, they were perhaps altered: in a letter of 29 June 1921, Roussel increased the initial sum of 50,000 francs to 75,000, and in exchange reserved all the royalties to himself; it was thus a flat payment.

Several points in the contract could lead to contestation: Roussel has "requested" that Pierre Frondaie "adapt his novel" and Frondaie has agreed to "write the play"; but nowhere does it say if Pierre Frondaie's name should appear on the billing. Another oversight is the absence of dates. Roussel addressed this rider to Frondaie on 1 July 1920:

My dear friend,

It has been agreed that you will send me the last act of *Locus Solus* by 15 December 1920.

My best wishes to you.

Raymond Roussel.

AROUND THE WORLD — PIERRE LOTI AND TAHITI

His mind at ease, Raymond Roussel set off on his travels: quite simply, he intended to go on a voyage round the world, alone, with no servants (he had got by without any during the war!) and without a doctor (he was surer of his health than his

mother had been), “via India, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific islands, China, Japan and America” (*How I Wrote...*). Like the historian Juillard in *Impressions of Africa* who “was agreeably well off”, Roussel also undertook “continual pleasure trips”. But these travels were well prepared: he not only avoided places that might bring back happy childhood memories, but also certain routes (for some of his life, Roussel suffered anxiety attacks in tunnels and avoided night trains so as always to know where he was). Though obsessed with cleanliness, he set off with just one suitcase, even for long journeys, and simply purchased what he needed as he travelled. As he had, according to Charlotte Dufrène, a gift for languages, he had no worries about making himself understood abroad. He had learnt Spanish during the war, knew a little German and had a smattering of English. That said, he was still capable of rhyming “John” with “clown” and “*intimes*” with “Times” in *New Impressions of Africa*, which is a little daring!

According to Roger Vitrac, when Roussel travelled around the world, and was crossing India (“How charming that Hindu tongue is!...”*), he decided to send an electric radiator to his mistress, who had requested a “rare” souvenir of that country. Is that true? This trip to India is often confused with the one he made ten years earlier with his mother.

“When he left on a journey [...], he never said a word,” reported his nephew Michel Ney. “He left, he vanished and, from time to time, we received a card from him... that’s all.”

If he rather neglected his family, Roussel’s postcards to Charlotte Dufrène are full-blown letters. For example, this colour postcard, sent from Melbourne and showing a street of the extremely modern town, with fine buildings and a tramline (“Collins St. Looting, W. Melbourne”):

You would not like Melbourne, for it is full of handsomes [*sic*] cabs. I adore it, for I love this form of locomotion. I have already used the candle-powered heating, for it is winter here; during the first part of the crossing, I think they would have melted without my lighting them. As my room faces due north, I have the sun all day. There are delicious oysters and as there is no *r* in the month, it is the perfect season for them. One evening, I intend to eat kangaroo soup, which is a great Australian speciality. Horse races are a passion. There are seven tracks in Melbourne and every other city likewise; as for the towns, they all have at least one. This is the home of Melba; her real name is Armstrong and Melba a stage-name taken from Melbourne. Near here, there are two sea resorts called Brighton and Menton. What was the point coming so far if it was just to go to Brighton and Menton, which I have already done!

A thousand tender thoughts.

Raymond.†

In Australia, Roussel lengthened his stay by going to Tasmania, from where he sent this postcard (“Cataract gorge, Launceston, Tasmania”):

* *The Star on the Forehead*, Act I, scene 3. Trans. Martin Sorrell.

† Card copied from the original by Michel Leiris.

My little Charlotte,
 I am in Tasmania; but there are no more Tasmanian Aborigines. Queen Trouguénéné was the last to survive and she died fifteen years ago; she is buried near Hobart Town, but here I am at the opposite end of the island. Sorry about writing this card in pencil, but that 'is allowed, is it not, for such short distances.
 My tender thoughts.
 Raymond.*

But he did not always joke. Upon hearing that he had arrived in Oceania, Charlotte Dufrené wrote to him saying how much she envied his being able to admire so many different landscapes, and above all the sunsets, which must be so beautiful. He replied that he had seen nothing, and that the way his trip was organised did not permit that; he was busy writing in his cabin and had not left it for several days in order to be more available for visiting Tahiti, where he was to have “rather a long stay”.

In Papeete, it seems that the first thing Raymond Roussel did was to send a bouquet of flowers to Pierre Loti, accompanied by a postcard (“Isle of Moorea, seen from Tahiti”):

Dear Master,
 I am sending you these flowers, gathered by the stream of Fataoua by a devout pilgrim who has come to this island to plant a kiss in your footsteps.
 Papeete, 1 October 1920.
 Raymond Roussel.

This gift of flowers is symptomatic of Roussel's fetishism. Having discovered the “secret of words” — that sought by Rabelais, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean-Pierre Brisset and Alfred Jarry — he seems almost to have discovered the secret of things, as well. Of course, he did not naïvely wonder if inanimate objects had a “soul”, but he uncovered their hidden meanings. As for Julien Viaud, in terms of words he was not only his pseudonym (Pierre Loti), but also his double, Mata Reva.† Flowers then became the focus of the pilgrimage, not just as relics, but as tangible proof of the voyage to the antipodes, and, as with words, these flowers had a secret: they stood for the book (*Le Mariage de Loti*). The accompanying postcard was just a necessary concession, like the label attached to a biscuit he brought back from Camille Flammarion's. Roussel's obsession with order fits well with the fetishism that had invaded his home.‡ According to the precise plan given to his housekeeper, objects that belonged to his mother must never be moved. For all objects can be “read” — just as “the view” in a pen-holder, the label on a bottle and the engraving on a letterhead can be deciphered — and an entire memory brought back.

This approach also sheds light on Roussel's attitude to painting. He was to give a striking demonstration of this discovery of the secret of objects in *L'Étoile au Front*: all the stories the characters tell are visible in and contained by an object, which has

* *Idem*.

† Pierre Loti was Viaud's pen-name, and Mata Reva the name of the hero of *Le Mariage de Loti*; the three are thus conflated into one “real” yet fictional character. [Trans.]

‡ For example, the display case with a red velvet base containing, according to a label in Roussel's handwriting, “dust gathered on the tomb of Aziyadé”, discovered by Jacques Hérold in a Parisian flea market.

its own meaning. Real objects (dry flowers from Tahiti, dust from the tomb of Aziyadé, Camille Flammarion's biscuit) are directly evocative, without any need for intermediaries; in his imagination, Roussel wanted words (thanks to his procedure) to create visible objects. And in *L'Étoile au Front* we actually "see" them: they are there, on stage — and they "narrate"! Maybe it was to make the inventions of *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus* visible that he wanted them dramatised: he and we could thus see them better than by simply reading! What is more, objects could be sufficient in themselves; words (the postcard to Loti, the label on the biscuit, the dialogues in *L'Étoile au Front*) would then be superfluous. And that is just what the hero of *La Poussière de Soleils* understands, while deciphering objects, each one of which in the "chain" contains the "word" of the succeeding one.

What Roussel does not mention is that the day before he sent flowers to Pierre Loti, on 29 September 1920, he got a certain Laurent Rarahu to sign the title-pages of a copy of *Le Mariage de Loti* (not the 1882 first edition, but a recent 1916 re-edition), and then, on 1 October, Louis Rarahu and, according to his own note, Rarahu's sister, Tauaea, and her son, Taua, who was being raised by Rarahu. But, as Alain Quella-Villéger remarks:*

Rarahu, the heroine of *Le Mariage de Loti*, never existed: "I combined several people to make just one Rarahu. And it seems to me to be a quite faithful study of a young Maori woman" [Letter from Pierre Loti to his friend Plumkett, 24.2.1879, published in *Journal Intime*, 1, pp.62-3], the tonality of Rarahu suggesting the name Tarahu, her elder brother's "wife" (who became Taïmaha in the novel, as Gustave became Rouéri). It is no surprise if numerous travellers came across authentic Rarahus between 1910 and 1920, or again their descendants. There is even still a tomb of Rarahu in Vaitoure, on the isle of Tahaa! This fictional heroine has become a monumental hoax, just as her author is a monument: a bust was erected in 1934 near "Loti's bath" and a concrete ornamental lake in the valley of Fautaua (Fataoua).

But it was in order to follow the trace of Rarahu, and for no other reason, that Roussel had travelled so far. The proof is that he had brought along a copy of *Le Mariage de Loti* in his luggage. (Unless he bought it in a bookshop in Papeete, which is far from impossible, given how well the Loti business was run.)

Roussel, who "complained bitterly and naïvely that he did not have the glory of a Loti",† had been struck by the opening pages of *Le Mariage de Loti* concerning the antipodes. Wasn't it the underside of words and things that he himself was looking for?

When it happened, it was about one o'clock in the afternoon in London and Paris.

It was about midnight, down under, on the other side of the terrestrial ball, in the garden of Pomaré the dead queen, that the scene took place.

In Europe, it was a cold, dull winter's day. Down under, in the Queen's gardens, it was the calm, restive languidness of a summer's night.

Later (second part, chapter XIX), he came across these words, that seemed to

* *Pierre Loti, l'Incompris*, Presses de la Renaissance, 1986.

† Jean Cocteau, *En toute hâte*, 1933.



have been written for him:

In the opposite direction to the waterfalls in the Bois de Boulogne and Hyde Park, Fataoua's waterfall tumbled there, beneath the old world, disturbing that deeply calm and silent nature with its monotonous din.

The waterfall in the Bois de Boulogne? Roussel lived just beside it! So, there was a place in the world where life was inverted, as though on the other side of a mirror? Although he claimed that he fled reality, he nevertheless went there, to Tahiti, to see that waterfall which "tumbled" in the antipodes, "in the opposite direction" to the one he knew. Even though the monogram on Roussel's letterheads (two interwoven capital Rs, one the mirror image of the other) is of a fairly common sort, particularly when the two initials are identical, it too is part of this system of reflections, of that symmetry we find in the "procedure" when two sentences echo

each other at the beginning and end of a prose text. These “reflections” can also be found in the numerous twins Roussel’s works contain.

He of course had himself photographed beside Fataoua’s waterfall, which is near Papeete, and was guided through the forests in search of the tombs of Rarahu’s family.

Beside the tomb of one of Rarahu’s children, Roussel placed a wooden cross bearing this inscription:

Here
lies
PUTA A TARAHU
died on
8 December 1918.
Sadly missed
Pray
for him.

During this visit to the woods, he met and photographed a young Tahitian boy who was so good-looking that he made him pose in seven different ways!

More seriously, he noted that Rarahu’s real name was Tetuanuirerehaore, and her husband’s was Tere hapaïtahaa. From the registry office, he obtained a copy in French of Rarahu’s death certificate, dated 19 January 1915, and another copy in Tahitian. He also noted that Tanira a Tarahu had a son, called Tanira iti, Puta’s brother, who looked like Loti...

But Roussel’s cup must have brimmed over when he made an unexpected discovery: “Georges Leverd, Faa,* last photo of Rarahu. Delpit, lawyer in Paris, print of Rarahu”! Without waiting to meet Delpit in Paris, Roussel obtained (at what price?) a yellowed and dog-eared full-length print of an old (?) Tahitian woman, of which he piously had a copy made on his return, with the following information which, of course, authenticated the photograph: “Halawsa, Bohemian photographer hair down his neck. Worked in Yokohama for 2 years (1911), came to Tahiti in about 1909 or 1910 and photographed Rarahu.” Who can argue with such precise information?

We should also add that, during his travels, Roussel bought a large number of small photos mounted on cardboard, the ancestors of the tourist postcard, sometimes dated 1876 or 1886, landscapes, ships in harbour, or groups of Tahitian women, as souvenirs of the admired writer’s journey. What is more, he photographed a few curiosities, in particular a native with monstrously deformed arms and legs, which is perhaps a local speciality.

One more name figures on the copy of *Le Mariage de Loti* which he was to have sumptuously bound by Gruel on his return: it is, according to his transcription, Terümaevaua Apomare/Arümoporapora, Queen of Bora Bora. But what interested him most were the grandchildren of Queen Aimata Pomaré IV (died 1877, the year



* Or rather, Faaa, a suburb of Papeete, now an international airport.



Roussel with the Tahitian royal family, 30 October 1920.

* At least, if we believe Roussel's *cahier de dédicaces*, since this copy of *Locus Solus*, presumably on Japanese vellum, has not come to light. At the Loti sale in 1964 (auctioned by Ader) there was a copy of *Locus Solus* inscribed to Mme Loti, and a copy of *La Pousière de Soleils* on Japanese vellum to Pierre Loti's son, Samuel Loti-Viaud. (Neither of these volumes is mentioned in the catalogue of inscriptions.)

Roussel was born) and the widow of her eldest son Pomaré V (died in 1891), Marantaaroa, whom he met in their property in Arue, a suburb of Papeete, and with whom he had himself photographed. "Po (night) maré (cough)", noted Roussel, who seems to have made the effort to acquire a little Tahitian. He was to stay in contact with Queen Marantaaroa, whose letters he kept (she remembered the "virtuoso musician" who had delighted her court at Papeete), and he took care of her children when they came to France; he of course then gave them his books "to Her Highness Princess Tekan Pomaré / respectfully presented by an enthusiast of the 'Isle of Dreams'" (*Locus Solus*); she also received "the deeply respectful compliments of a grateful traveller" (*Impressions d'Afrique*) and that of "the solitary man of Te Aorai".

But he whom the Leiris family used to call "Ramuntcho", the Spanish diminutive of Raymond (more because of Pierre Loti's novel than the Basque beret he wore in Biarritz!), could certainly not be content with just sending his idol a few flowers gathered by Fataoua's stream in Tahiti. While in Paris, he had already sent him a copy of *Locus Solus* with the following overblown inscription:*

to Pierre Loti, to the superman whose name must be uttered on one's knees, with compliments of incommensurable fanaticism.

R.R.

For Loti's pages, I am like a morphine addict for his morphine, I *must* have my daily ration of Loti's pages.

He also sent him — though we do not know whether it was before, during or after his journey — his *Pages Choiesies*, with these words:

Presented, one knee on the ground, to Mata Reva.

It is once again in *Le Mariage de Loti* (first part, chapter XXXI) that we can find an explanation for this inscription:

... *Mata Reva* was the name Rarahu gave me, not wanting Loti, which came from Faïmana or from Ariitêa. — *Mata* means literally *eye*; it is by their eyes that the Maoris designate people, and the names they give them are generally highly appropriate...

Plumkett, for example, was called *Mata pifaré* (cat's eye); Brown, *Mata ioré* (rat's eye), and John, *Mata ninamu* (azure eye)...

Rarahu did not want any resemblance with an animal for me; the more poetic name *Mata Reva* was the one she chose after considerable hesitation...

I consulted the dictionary of the venerable Picpus brethren — and found the following:

Reva, firmament; — abyss, depth; — mystery...

Pierre Loti replied with a visiting-card, also undated:

PIERRE LOTI

highly amused and charmed by the tale which Monsieur Raymond Roussel was good enough to send him "one knee on the ground", begs him to receive his thanks and compliments.

Pierre Loti.

Roussel did not lose heart faced with this difficulty in approaching Loti; he then applied to his secretary, Gaston Mauberger:*

Thursday

Sir,

Deeply touched by the kind letter that you were good enough to send me, I am applying to you for news of Monsieur Pierre Loti's health.

At the same time, I should like to tell you how happy I should be, when next you come to Paris, to show you the documents I have brought back from Tahiti concerning the immortal Rarahu [the photograph, presumably]. I could perhaps entrust you with those documents that you think may captivate the Master, so that you could show them to him? I shall be at your disposal at the time and place you indicate.

Supposing that you must be keen on the Orient, I have taken the liberty to send you two small souvenirs that I brought back from China [two small earthenware figurines]. Perhaps they might interest you, even though reality of this sort is always inferior to the slightest paragraph of *Derniers jours de Pékin*!

Yours faithfully.

* The letters to Gaston Mauberger are undated. They were published by Alain Quella-Villéger in the review *Prisme*. Our ordering is different from his; we believe that the letter beginning "Sir" predates the ones that start "Dear Sir".

Did Gaston Mauberger find a pretext to avoid meeting his correspondent? Roussel tried again, and suggested an intermediary:

Dear Sir,
 Dare I ask you to grant a brief interview to Madame Dufrène, one of the Master's fervent admirers?
 I have often spoken to her of my pilgrimage to Tahiti and I have charged her concerning that subject with a few requests which are extremely important to me.
 I envy her and ask you to accept, dear sir, my thanks in anticipation.

Wouldn't it have been easier for Roussel to send his requests in writing?

Thursday.

Dear Sir,
 A thousand thanks for your kind letter and I hope that you are now perfectly recovered. I greatly appreciate your promise to inform me of your next trip to Paris.
 Could you, who are fortunate enough to approach the Master, possibly ask Him a question of a psychological nature that is extremely important to me? What I want to know is if Monsieur Pierre Loti, at about the age of nineteen or twenty, when he started to write and discovered he had genius, experienced a sensation of radiating universal glory, for a short period of a few months, that was as intense as the one he must experience now that he has reached such a summit of prestige. I speak of a purely interior sensation that must have been followed by a terrible let down, when his early writings were published and the public did not immediately understand what a great poet had been born. I think that the Master should be able to give you a categorical answer for, if it is yes, that sensation must have left an infinitely deep trace.
 It goes without saying that I promise to keep any answer you might give me strictly to myself.
 In the hope of making your acquaintance, please accept, dear sir, my humble respect.

So what really interested Roussel? Was it in fact Loti's work, or just his "glory"? And was it in fact Pierre Loti's glory, or his own? We may even wonder if he was truly "devastated", as he said he was to Mauberger, when he learnt that Pierre Loti had died on Sunday 10 June 1923, in Hendaye:

Sir,
 I was devastated by the awful news and I want to send you my deepest condolences.
 I remind you how happy I should be if, during one of your trips to Paris, you would accept to lunch or dine at my home, unless you would prefer us to meet in Paris. Name whatever time you please.
 We shall speak of the Great Dead!

And Raymond Roussel got the *Argus** to send him all the press cuttings concerning the Academician's death. Including, of course, this extract from *Le Figaro* from 9 August 1923, in the form of an illustrated diptych — on the left, the tomb of Rarahu (?), on the right, the waterfall of Fataoua:

* The "*Argus de la Presse*" was a press-cutting agency. [Trans.]

It is in these terms that the waterfall of Fataoua is described in *Le Mariage de Loti*: "In the opposite direction [etc.]" (These two photographs were sent to us by M. Raymond Roussel who took them during a pilgrimage which, as a fervent admirer of Pierre Loti, he made to the Pearl of the Pacific.)

And including this article by Maurice Prax which appeared in *Le Petit Parisien*:

Yes, Loti was great, very great. He was greater than the greatest actress, greater than the greatest boxer, greater than the most famous jockey... He was infinitely great!

In the end, the glory of a writer is perhaps just that: exceeding actresses, boxers and jockeys. Or else leaving behind a body of work, like Pierre Loti (and like Raymond Roussel?) which is being rediscovered today?

Roussel kept in contact with those close to Pierre Loti, and showered them with gifts: among others, a green bronze Egyptian cat, about thirty centimetres high and mounted on a marble plinth which he had sent to the Master, a Sèvres vase for Gaston Mauberger, a book to Samuel Loti-Viaud, and a huge box of chocolates to his wife, Elsie, while he was travelling in Austria in July 1926, not forgetting this inscription in a copy of *Locus Solus* on Japanese vellum:

to Mme Pierre Loti, in respectful gratitude for the extremely beautiful inscription on *Roman d'un enfant*.

But the strangest document is certainly the portrait of Loti in the uniform of the Académie française which was found among Roussel's papers: on the photo, somebody has inked in two large ears, before crossing out the face... The intention could be either mocking or malevolent, but we do not know who disfigured the photo, or why Raymond Roussel kept it.

Did Roussel also undertake a little tourism in Tahiti? Nothing can be affirmed, and the fact that he sent postcards of Mooréa does not prove that he visited that neighbouring island. All we know for certain is that he went to Arue, where the tomb of Pomaré IV and the Pomaré family's cemetery can be found, just five kilometres from the centre of Papeete; and to the waterfalls of Fataoua (the "Fort of Fachoda" can still be seen there, built to shelter the governor in the event of a British attack) just eight kilometres away.

He sent the same postcards to both Pierre Loti and Robert de Montesquiou:*

Dear Sir,

At present I am undertaking a pious pilgrimage to the "Delicious Island". I have seen the waterfall of Fataoua "which flows in the opposite direction to the one in the Bois de Boulogne" and have heard wedding songs in the moonlight. The Queen, who speaks excellent French and is very well informed, has introduced me to several of Rarahu's descendants. I thought that you would be interested by this view of the island of Mooréa where some of the most

* B.N. Manuscripts Dept., undated (post-marked: 2.10.1920, Papeete). The spelling of the word "himénés" [for *hyménés*, "wedding songs"] is the same in the card to Loti.

astonishing passages of the book are set.

Please accept, dear Sir, a friendly thought from your distant admirer.

Raymond Roussel.

He also wrote to Philippe Soupault — or received a letter from him during his travels, as is shown by the copy on Japanese vellum of *La Poussière de Soleils* inscribed in January 1927 (“confraternal memories from his Tahitian correspondent”) — and naturally to Charlotte Dufrène (“Isle of Mooréa seen from Tahiti”):

In Papeete, I live on Rue de Rivoli, just opposite the one in Paris. If my Rue de Rivoli has no Rumpelmayer [the Parisian tea-rooms, 226, Rue de Rivoli], one can instead eat marvellous fruit there. I am the immediate neighbour of the Queen and we are on excellent terms. She speaks very good French and is very interesting when she speaks about her island. The other night I heard “wedding songs”; they are quite strange and poetic Tahitian choirs.

A thousand tender and distant thoughts.

Raymond.

His Tahitian friends nicknamed him the “Prince of Fine Manners”, he told Juliette Jannet on his return; “Arüpen Roussel” he noted in his papers.

On 13 October, the Papeete agency of the Oceania Naval Company gave Roussel a receipt for an advance payment of 4000 francs; then, on the 14th, one for the balance of 1,000 francs for passage on the *Jeannc d’Arc*. Roussel continued his trip round the world. He was in Sydney on 3 December 1920 and in Peking in January 1921; after a short tour round the town, he locked himself away to work; he nevertheless brought back a “ceramic depicting a prostrate wrestler”^{*} for Michel Leiris’s mother; in Canton, he bought some ivory balls. He was in Japan in March 1921 and visited Tokyo, Nagasaki and Yokohama. There is no trace of any “souvenirs”, except perhaps a portrait on silk. To Dr Janet he said this of America: “Having arrived in a New York hotel, I wanted to have a bath and that idea rather pleased me; I learnt that there were three thousand bathrooms in the hotel, that three thousand travellers could have a bath at the same time as me; my pleasure vanished [...]. To enjoy something to the full, one must know that it is forbidden to others, that it is a privilege.”

“I travelled right round the world [...]: and used nothing of what I saw,” he told Élie Richard in 1927. “All cities are alike,” he informed Pierre Leiris.

His nephew Michel Ney found this indifference hard to accept: “I never travelled with him, I thus never had the chance to see if he took notes; but I have the impression that, when he went round the world, he definitely did take notes.” We know that he did so in 1906, when he travelled in Egypt. And it was he that wrote, by hand, to the Chancellery of the *Légion d’honneur*: “From 1920 to 1921, travelled round the world for literary documentation”. Yet in 1928, when reading André Chevrillon’s *Puritains du désert*, he noted: “Am loving it because I, who have travelled so much, have never written about my travels.”

^{*} “... on a bed-plinth, whose dull green colour I have not forgotten, associated as it was with the brown, white and black of the figurine, as well as with a purplish-blue shade, one of those Chinese shades (vermillion, scarlet, indigo, turquoise, olive) [...]. Just slightly concave, the four sides of the bed-plinth, where the mouldings jugged out, were reminiscent of roofs bent up at their corners which, it seems, are the most immediately noticeable feature of Chinese edifices.” Michel Leiris, *Fibrilles*, 1966.

What is sure is that, on his return, he swore that he never wanted to see a suitcase again and would give up travelling!

THE THEATRE ADAPTATION OF LOCUS SOLUS

Meanwhile, Pierre Frondaie's work on the stage version of *Locus Solus* was far from finished. The third draft of Act I had perhaps been completed (in scene X, Roussel exclaims: "In 1920, I heard Danton!"); it had already been reworked three times.

If Raymond Roussel's reckoning in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres* can be believed, it was at about this time that he abandoned his description of a pair of opera-glasses that he had begun in 1915, and instead started work on the *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* as they have come down to us — and which he would also abandon temporarily for two periods of six months in order to write his two plays *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*. In this way he calculated it took him seven years to compose *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.

It is also highly probable that he started seeing Dr Janet again; in his observations, the doctor refers to a "forty-" or "fifty-year-old man" whose pseudonym was Martial, Canterel's first name in *Locus Solus*.

Until that summer, Roussel kept up a correspondence with Pierre Frondaie,* who seems still to have been working on the adaptation of *Impressions d'Afrique* and not to have read *Locus Solus* yet:

Thursday.

Dear Friend,

These three lines are as "great as kingdoms", to use an expression of Rostand's. I know them off by heart and repeat them to myself incessantly.

You will receive a *Locus Solus*; the passage concerning the Federal and the Breton legend runs from page 3 to page 34. With all the admiration from your friend.

Raymond Roussel.

Thursday.

Dear Friend,

How would Sunday at 7 o'clock suit you? And, with this heat, how about coming to my place? I shall show you around my own "Locus Solus", which you have not yet seen (at least this one is generally, alas, more successful than the other!). With my friendship,

Raymond Roussel.

At first glance I did not notice that the final line of your letter is one of my own offspring!

Express letter, dated 16 June 1921:

Thursday.

Dear Friend,

I have got rid of my telephone, as I detest that awful invention! You telephoned during the

* Roussel's letters were copied from the originals and put in order by John Ashbery (*Bizarre*, 34-5). Those from Pierre Frondaie are in the Roussel manuscript collection at the B.N.

last hours when it was still working. Could you write me a note? If the evening would be all right, then I could come and see you next week, on Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, wherever you want and at the time which would suit you best between 7 and 11.

With my best wishes,
Raymond Roussel.

[Wednesday] 29 June 1921.

My dear Pierre Frondaie,

It has been agreed that when you deliver the end of the play I shall give you an extra twenty-five thousand francs over what was settled in our contract of 27 December 1919. I shall then be the sole recipient of the royalties up to a sum of seventy-five thousand francs, without your bearing any further responsibility.

Your friend,
Raymond Roussel.

... and, even though he did not mention it, a further 15,000 francs for having accepted an interruption in the run of his own play *L'Insoumise*, which shared the bill at the Théâtre Antoine in December 1922 with *The Mystery of "Locus Solus"*!

This is not so much a letter as a rider, and it was almost certainly put together by both men in the lounge of the Hôtel Majestic, where they had met. The mention of Pierre Frondaie's "responsibility" is rather absurd. He seems quite clear that he had no intention of becoming "responsible" for this venture. They now seemed to have clarified the fact of the contract not stating that Pierre Frondaie's name should appear on the bill; only Raymond Roussel would now be named.

Pierre Frondaie sometimes replied in verse:

Sonnet

*Public ivre, ton courroux, sel
Du pot-au-feu que d'habitude
On t'administre, vieux Latude,
T'a fait méconnaître Roussel.*

*Critique hagard, loup-garou, ccl
Du trésor neuf, quelle hébétude
Veut que sa géniale étude
Soit, pour toi, embûche, trou, scel?*

*Ton goût, c'est le cachet de cire
Du médiocre épris d'occire
Sur l'autel Moins l'archange Plus!*

*Tu ne sais que, quand tu lis, braire.
Et l'orgueil du Locus Solus
Reste en exil chez le libraire.**

** Drunk public, your wrath, salt
Of a stew which usually
You are given, old Latude
Has made you overlook Roussel.
Haggard critic, werewolf, conceal-
ment
Of new treasure, what stupor
Means that his brilliant study
Is for you an obstacle, a hole, a
seal?
Your taste is the wax seal
Of the mediocre that adores killing
The archangel of More on the altar
of Less.
When you read, all you can do is
bray.
And the pride of Locus Solus
Remains exiled in the bookshop.*

Raymond Roussel kept other sonnets by Pierre Frondaie, one dated 13 August 1921, another on the back of a calling-card from 1923: both refer to episodes in *Impressions d'Afrique* or *Locus Solus*.

Sunday, 7 August 1921, 6.00-6.20, Pierre Frondaie.

My dear friend, I am sending you this improvised sonnet to thank you for kindly wiring me your own poetry. I am greatly looking forward to seeing you on Wednesday at 7 o'clock precisely at the Majestic.

P.F.

Roussel replied as soon as he received this poem:

Tuesday.

So we agree on tomorrow Wednesday at 7 o'clock.

Thank you for your extraordinary sonnet, with all its rhymes in "Roussel". It is a masterpiece and "*lis braire*" is wonderful. It reminds me of this dodecasyllabic rhyme:

*Dans ces meubles laqués, rideaux et dais moroses
Danse, aime, bleu laquais, rit [sic] d'oser des mots roses.**

With best wishes,

Raymond Roussel.

JULES VERNE AND EUGÈNE LEIRIS

At that time, in the spring or summer of 1921, Eugène Leiris had recently undergone a serious operation and asked to borrow a book by Jules Verne from Roussel, who owned his complete works:

Friday.

Dear friend,

There, alas, you are on dangerous ground!

Ask me for my life, but do not ask me to lend you a Jules Verne! I am so fanatical about his works that they make me "jealous". If you re-read them, then, I beg of you, never talk to me about them, nor even mention their name in my presence, for it seems to me that it would be sacrilegious to mention them unless on one's knees. It is He, and by a long way, who is *the greatest literary genius of all time*. He will remain when all the other authors of this period have been long forgotten. It is in fact as absurd to make children read them as it is to have them learn La Fontaine's fables, they being so deep that already few adults are capable of appreciating them.

You will not believe what a great joy it was to see your dear handwriting again for the first time after so long.

Look after yourself and get well quickly, which is the greatest pleasure you could give to

Your good friend,

Raymond Roussel.

There is a reference to this passion for Jules Verne's work in his posthumous book:

In these notes I should also like to pay homage to that man of immeasurable genius who was Jules Verne.

* A holorhyme: *In this lacquered furniture, curtains and morose canopies / Dance, love, blue foot-man, laugh at daring romantic talk.*

A facsimile of this letter was reproduced as an "unpublished note" on p.98 of *Raymond Roussel: Life, Death & Works* (Atlas Press, 1987), with an English translation by John Ashbery, who owns it, noting that it was "probably to Pierre Frondaie"; John Ashbery forgot that he had already published this letter in *Bizarre*, 34-5.

My admiration for him is infinite.

In certain pages of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Around the Moon*, *The Mysterious Island* and *Hector Servadac*, he rose to the highest peaks to which human language can attain [...].

Oh bless you, incomparable Master, for the sublime hours that all my life I have spent incessantly reading and re-reading you.

Echoes of Jules Verne's books can indeed be found in Roussel's work: *The Green Ray* in *La Peau de la raie* and in *New Impressions of Africa*; *Around the World in Eighty Days* (the time difference in the story of Masclet and the seven razors in *The Star on the Forehead*); and so on. The theatre critics were not far wrong when they found that the brilliant scientists in *Impressions d'Afrique*, *Locus Solus* and *L'Étoile au Front* (even in *La Poussière de Soleils*, where the scientist takes no active part) had walked straight out of one of Jules Verne's books.*

This refusal to lend a book from his library to a friend he trusted more than any other is another instance of Roussel's fetishism. When he asked Zo the painter to draw "a man sitting at a table, with a book lying vertically on it, two uncut pages of which he is prying apart to read a passage", which he compares in *New Impressions of Africa* to a "bold mother" pulling aside the curtains of a crib, he gave us an image of himself in front of an uncut book, in the pose of a bibliophile, or in any case like someone who is crazily respectful of "books". However, we also know that when Roussel travelled by car, he read the torn-out pages of a book, kept stuffed in his pockets, so that nobody would see him reading... Thus, it was not so much the book as an object that he respected, but the act of reading — an act which had to be carried out in secret, with a discretion normally reserved for forbidden pleasures and sacred rites.

After the death of Eugène Leiris in 1921, Roussel quite naturally entrusted his money matters to his son, Pierre. They had a cordial relationship, but it would seem that Roussel never really forgave Pierre for having given up music, his first love, for banking, to pay the bills. In his simple thinking, Roussel could not imagine that, behind his façade of being a banker, Pierre Leiris might have other tastes that would have brought them more closely together. Roussel was still trying for the jackpot, and continued to play the Stock Market, investing heavily on the futures market rather than in currency, content to send his stockbroker laconic postcards, some with just two words — "*Mille bravos!*", for example — after a successful deal.

LETTERS TO ROBERT DE MONTESQUIOU

That summer of 1921, after travelling around the world, Raymond Roussel started corresponding with Robert de Montesquiou again. The first postcard he sent him

* We can in this manner recover Roussel's reading material and pick out the more or less conscious allusions. For example, we know that he read a scientific periodical called *La Nature* (the "blue covers of *La Nature* magazine", "a set of old copies of *La Nature*"), Victor Hugo (*L'Âme de Victor Hugo*, *Guitare*, *Napoléon II*), Barbey d'Aurevilly (*Le Rideau cramoisi*), Cherbuliez (*Les Inconséquences de monsieur Drommel*), Pierre Loti, Jean Richepin, La Fontaine, François Coppée, Alexandre Dumas, Zévaco (*Les Pardaillan*), Gaboriau (*Monsieur Lecoq*), Conan Doyle, Camille Flammarion, etc.

depicted a coloured view of the Gare Montparnasse. He alluded to the card sent from Tahiti:

Here is a less original view than the one I sent you last year! I am starting to pick up on my average again by staying in all summer. Thank you for your witty consignment, I have added it to all the other charming autographs I have from you.

Your sedentary friend and admirer.

Raymond Roussel.

Montesquiou answered with another station; Roussel immediately replied with a view of the Gare du Nord:

I feel extremely humiliated
for your railway station is even
more beautiful than mine!

Raymond Roussel.

A further postcard informs us that Robert de Montesquiou has been trying to get D'Annunzio to read Roussel's works:

Dear Sir,

Your "reply" is so charming that I must thank you for it in turn. It contains some precious news: to earn the approval of the great D'Annunzio is a turning point in a writer's life.

With my thankful admiration.

Raymond Roussel.

On 27 October, he thankfully acknowledged receipt of *Les Délices de Capharnaüm*, which Montesquiou had just had published:

How much I enjoyed Strowski's beautiful and penetrating article, and also the one in *Le Figaro*. I am continuing my own enthusiastic reading and it is giving me such joy that, to the thanks I owe a friend, it seems that I must also add those to "the poet", "the philosopher" and "the artist".

Raymond Roussel.

At the beginning of November, he wrote Montesquiou a long letter of thanks for his copy of *Élus et Appelés*, which he had just received, and which contained a study of "A Difficult Author", plus some new comments on *La Vue*:

Saturday.

Dear Sir,

How to express the confusion I feel at seeing the place of honour that I occupy in your marvellous work? With deep admiration, I have *re-read* the "Difficult Author" and *read* the study of *La Vue*. What an extraordinary achievement to have used the resources of your quintessential art and infinite erudition on such humble subjects!

How many disconcerting inspirations!
 The genie of the Thousand and One Nights!
 The balls of ivory! (I brought back some similar ones from Canton.)
 Robert Houdini's fairy-hat!
 Achilles's shield!
 Homer's horse!
 The parallel between the two bracelets!
 The "dogs' jewels", the "ladies' moustaches", the "Virgins' troubles"!
 Escorial!
 The work of Callicrates!
 The glass frigate in the Lagenal!
 The Mexican diminutives!
 The cut-outs of black paper!
 The insect revue!
 It is stunning, and how proud I felt to see my own poor verses in such company!
 I have not yet had the time (none the less, I stumbled upon the paragraph on page XVI by chance) to read the rest of your work; I am looking forward to long happy hours!
 A thousand and another thousand thanks, dear Sir, for so spoiling me.
 From your thankful admirer.
 Raymond Roussel.

Would you allow me to have chapter VIII published in the supplement to *Le Figaro* (or at least some sizable extracts) as was done for the "*Raphaël des Chats*",* with a heading written in similar vein?

Robert de Montesquiou did not at all like this idea of publishing an extract from his book in *Le Figaro*, or in *Le Gaulois*:

Wednesday.

Dear Sir,
 Thank you for your beautiful and charming letter.
 I shall discuss the matter with other publications than *Le Figaro* or *Le Gaulois* and, of course, I shall write to you again before anything has been agreed.
 I read on... and on... and am dazzled! and I cannot believe, when I am in the presence of such periods, that "you are no musician".
 With my great and thankful admiration.
 Raymond Roussel.

Among Robert de Montesquiou's papers, in the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, can be found two other postcards dated November 1921 in addition to the correspondence just examined: Roussel simply mentions that he is reading *Élus et Appelés*. There were to be no further exchanges. Robert de Montesquiou died in Menton on 11 December. On the 21st, he was buried in Versailles in the Gonards cemetery, beside his friend Gabriel de Yturri, watched over by the Angel of Silence.

In the issue of *Littérature*† for 1 April 1922, Philippe Soupault wrote a study of Raymond Roussel, who had invited him to his home in Neuilly. During their first

* By Robert de Montesquiou, later republished in *Élus et Appelés*. [Trans.]

† French Dada review, edited by Louis Aragon, André Breton and Philippe Soupault. [Trans.]

meeting, Roussel spoke only about music, and Soupault took away the idea that he had been a pupil of Massenet; in their second interview, Roussel launched into a long monologue about Jules Verne, which concluded: "Jules Verne is greater than Victor Hugo!", which is certainly saying something.

The interest the younger generation had in Roussel allowed critics to pigeonhole him with the Dadaists and the Surrealists. "I am being called a Dadaist," he laughingly said one day to Michel Leiris. "I do not even know what Dadaism is!" To Lugné-Poe he admitted that he found the Surrealists, who were sending him their work, "a bit obscure".*

In that same month of April 1922, Robert de Montesquiou's posthumous novel, *La Trépidation*, was published. He had finished it in 1914, on the eve of the outbreak of war, and had begun correcting the proofs when he suddenly died. Raymond Roussel became aware of the portrait it contained of him as a rich eccentric, but no letters survive to tell us what his reaction was.

LOCUS SOLUS AT THE THÉÂTRE ANTOINE

He was still waiting for the promised playscript from Pierre Frondaie. Adapting the novel was a slow, laborious job. The actors had been chosen, but the authors had still not settled on a final version of the play. As early as June, the newspapers had already started a smear campaign:

Now that M. Rothschild and associates are lording it over the Théâtre Antoine, this previously renowned playhouse seems to be doomed to decadence. Word has it that next season will include a play by M. Roussel, the author of *Impressions d'Afrique*. Are we to see on the Boulevard de Strasbourg stage-tracks made of veal lights, houses of marshmallow and railways of shepherd's pie?

Antoine, you must be in torment!†

On 7 July, Roussel wrote to Pierre Frondaie, who was staying in Arcachon:

My dear friend,
I have sent you the last two acts and a cut version of *Locus*.
Here are the dates I have been given by Signoret.
From 28 July to 31 August at the theatre of the Guipacha Opera, 375, Buenos Aires.
From 31 August to 15 September at the Lyrico theatre, Rio de Janeiro.
My sister greatly appreciated your *Le Reflet* [by Pierre Frondaie].
Yours as ever,
Raymond Roussel.
The feminine of Paul Hervieu is pure inspiration.‡

* Pierre Lazareff, *Paris-Midi*, 3 August 1933.

† Newspaper cutting, dated 14 June 1922.

‡ Copy belonging to Mme. Frondaie.

This "feminine" refers to a pun made by Pierre Frondaie which plays on the

dramatist Paul Hervieu and the variety artiste Polaire “*vieille*” [“old woman”]. Frondaie apparently thought that he was doing Roussel a good turn by inserting this sort of witticism in his adaptation (Act I, final version, scene X):

CANTAREL. As for me, a thinker, the innocent man is the theme.

2ND JUDGE. As for me, a judge, it is aversion.*

And, in the same act, we find alliterations such as “*Le génie nie*” [“genius denies”], or “*Tout à toi. Ton tuteur*” [“Ever yours, your guardian”]. They may seem feeble to us, but who can be sure that they did not appeal to Roussel?

A few days later, another urgent letter was sent to Frondaie, who was still in sunny Arcachon:

My dear friend,

Time now presses. You do remember the date (15 September) by which Signoret must receive a copy of the play in triplicate? As a precaution, I have sent him the previous version. Perhaps you should send him the three copies of the new version yourself, thus saving time, since most departures for Brazil leave from Bordeaux. Unless you would rather just send him the changes to the role of Canterel with a covering letter. I remind you of his address: M. Signoret, Theatre Lyrico, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

I hope to see you again soon for I believe you are intending to return in September.

Your friend and admirer,

Raymond Roussel†

These successive modifications to the script (and there were more to come!) were later to be used as an excuse by Signoret. When he was blamed for agreeing to act in *Locus Solus* he claimed that: “the first manuscript he was given was entirely different from the play that was produced after signature of his contract.”‡

The name of Pierre Frondaie did not appear on the notices, but this was certainly not down to Raymond Roussel who, in his posthumous book, openly declares that he had “asked him [...] to turn *Locus Solus* into a play” and that he himself had merely “had it produced”. The soon-to-be-successful novelist (*L’Homme à l’Hispano*, 1925) and, what is more, playwright (*L’Insoumise*) never omitted from the bibliographies of his own works his dramatisations of novels by Pierre Louÿs, Anatole France, Maurice Barrès or Claude Farrère. But these were distinguished writers, members or potential members of the Académie française, and not a rich unknown whom nobody took seriously. As far as Frondaie was concerned, the fact that he needed money was a good enough justification for agreeing to collaborate in a work which he certainly did not find negligible, but which was “preposterous”. The whole thing was in fact an open secret. Numerous press cuttings refer to Frondaie’s “collaboration”, or at least to his “advice”. The most sarcastic of the critics was André Rivoire:

* A play on “*thème*” and “*version*”, terms for unseen translation and prose composition. [Trans.]

† Copy belonging to Mme. Frondaie.

‡ *L’Intransigeant*, 17 December 1922.

The Théâtre Antoine has interrupted the successful run of M. Pierre Frondaie's *L'Insoumise* in order to give us a play which I shall discuss shortly.

But I should first like to point out that there has been no protest. M. Pierre Frondaie has not complained in the usual way to the authors' commission about the omnipotence of a management that stops the performance of a play that is drawing in the crowds. He has not published the expected indignant letter in the newspapers. On the contrary, on the day of the full dress-rehearsal he stood at the threshold of the theatre, welcoming the guests with a smile, and recommending to them this "curious" play, which had unthroned his own work and which was about to take over the theatre. I do not remember ever having seen an author who was so delighted to abandon his place to a colleague and M. Raymond Roussel, like the main character in his *Locus Solus*, must be a potent magician if he is capable of so brightening up a face which had every reason to look glum.

It would also seem that no expense has been spared to give every possible sparkle to the production of this play, adapted by some unknown writers — who have, modestly, remained anonymous — from a novel published at the outbreak of war on *de luxe* paper.*

The versions of the adaptation of *Locus Solus* that have come down to us do not permit us to make a complete reconstruction of the play. Not all the episodes in the novel were used and, if the newspapers are to be believed, the play even included certain "linchpins" from *Impressions d'Afrique*: the earthworm playing the cithara, the whalebone statue on rails of veal lights, the breathing apparatus with aglets, etc. Unless, that is, they were referred to as allusions to Roussel's first play! The most important borrowings concern chapter three (the diamond, the *aqua micans*, Faustine, the Siamese cat, Danton's head, the solidified Sauternes, the sea-horse race). Chapter six is included almost in its entirety. The play also features three passages from chapters two, four and seven (the painless extraction of teeth, the tale of the poet Gérard and an allusion to Mopsus the cockerel). But it is the story of François-Jules Cortier, the eighth dead man in the glass cage, which provided Pierre Frondaie with the central theme of his play, the rehabilitation of an innocent man. On the other hand, the argument published in the programme for the opening night makes no reference to this plot and, after a few lines describing the main character, simply discusses the various ballets:

Locus Solus

Cantrel [*sic*], a brilliant inventor and a man ahead of his time, lives in *Locus Solus*, his residence in Montmorency.

In this isolated location, he has consecrated his life to science and has made many marvellous new discoveries. We see him explaining his secrets to his friend Nointel in his gardens, or else in his laboratory.

Ballet of Glory

In Cantrel's laboratory, two judges proclaim that "Glory is like the living dead, and dances on the grave" so vigorously that a world-weary poet and a violent political demagogue appear, holding daggers, and demand death so that they can live on in posterity. The terrified judges take flight leaving the two ambitious men behind to prepare their own suicides, which Fortune herself cannot prevent. The poet and the orator both commit suicide and float up into Glory

* *Temps*, 18 December 1922.

which, among the graves, selects those who deserve immortality.

In the Diamond of Aqua Micans

Among some strange Cartesian divers, sea creatures live out a vibrant existence in “Aqua Micans”, while a sailor is struggling in the coils of a serpent.

Cantrel pours some Sauternes wine into the “Aqua Micans”, thereby precipitating a gold dust which, thanks to the iridescent sea-horses, turns into a dazzling sun. Faustine, decked out with melodious tresses, and her little cat Khóng-dek-lèn release the sailor who, as a token of his gratitude, gives his saviour a branch of coral. But the coral which has, despite the protection of its friends on the seabed, been-wrenched from its plant, slowly dies and soon becomes a diadem which the sailor triumphantly hands to Faustine.

*Apotheosis**

Before the vision of a beautifully dressed Queen of Hearts, some dominoes come to life.

After having provoked each of the dominoes, the queen chooses one and all would be well if the jealous King of Hearts did not suddenly appear.

But the queen skilfully reassures her husband and the royal couple retire with dignity.

There are two drafts of the first act of the earliest version of *Locus Solus*, then entitled *Le Mystère de Locus Solus*. The action takes place in the courtroom of Meaux, where Thierry Foucqueteau is being tried. The characters present are: François-Jules Cartier, aged fifty (spelt “Cortier” in the novel); François-Charles Cartier, aged twenty-two; Thierry Foucqueteau, aged twenty; Pascaline Foucqueteau; Maître Hober, the lawyer; Maître Ramare, the public prosecutor; the twelve members of the jury; the judge; the assessors; two police officers; the public, among whom are Cauterel [*sic*] and Raymond Noussel.

This Raymond Noussel, a journalist, is of course Roussel. The name later became Nointel, the part played by Félix Galipaux in the final version. But Roussel had no intention to conceal himself, for, in the publicity handouts for the play, the inventor Cantarel [*sic*] exhorts the public to read the book he has published under the “pseudonym” Raymond Roussel.

In the earliest version, in two tableaux (thirty-six typewritten pages), the greatest importance is given to the trial itself: the judge, the witnesses, the lawyers, the reaction of the public, and so on. The role of Cantarel [*sic*] is short, and the verdict is known from the outset. In the second version (nineteen typewritten pages), the evidence of the witnesses is interrupted by an adjournment, allowing Pierre Frondaie to give greater importance to Cantarel’s contribution. In the third and final version of Act I, the courtroom scene has quite simply been suppressed. At this stage, *Locus Solus* was to have four acts (of which Act II has not been found among Pierre Frondaie’s papers). All that can be asserted is that, based on the cast list and the order of appearance as published in the Théâtre Antoine programme, Act I corresponds to the third version, and nothing of the first two versions survived in the final text.

* After 11 December 1922, this passage was covered over by a sticker.

When we reach the full dress-rehearsal, it would seem that the play now had only three acts. Five days later, it was down to two. Finally, the programme attributes the “underwater ballet” and the “dance of the doll” to the second act, whereas they actually belonged to the end of Act III.

Only one critic, Pierre Scize on 9 December, wrote up a (rather personal) summary of the play, under the title “Brief Idiot’s Guide by way of a Matinée”:

For those spectators who are still in the dark, and for those that want to make up their own minds, here is a brief guide to the attractions of *Locus Solus*:

- 1st Entrance of men in furs.
 - 2nd Treatment of corpses with cold water.
 - 3rd Balletic entrance of Signoret/Cantrel.
 - 4th Interlude with Danton’s head and the Ballet of the Skeletons of Glory.
 - 5th Ballet of the Judges.
 - 6th The marvellous effects of *Resurrectine* and of *aqua miquans* [sic].
 - 7th How to desalinate fish and so teach them to sing.
 - 8th How an electoral train made of whalebone runs on rails of veal lights.
 - 9th Concerning emeralds, their dullness and their harmonic faculties.
 - 10th Scene in the stalls. Great set-to among the spectators.
 - 11th In which the actors confess that they are fed up.
 - 12th In which the audience applauds.
 - 13th Apotheosis: Signoret ascends to heaven on a rope.
- Curtain.

In early December, the *Cri de Paris* carried a series of puffs for the play, which was still being rehearsed:

Locus Solus is at once a theatrical extravaganza, a light comedy and a satirical drama. One of the actors tells how it happily blends *Ubu Roi* and *Caligari*. The action takes place now, in a Cubist land and the sets will, apparently, astonish the public.

But this play may not be as strange as some people say, after all, and, thanks to its originality, it might turn out to be a success for more reasons than just curiosity. (3 December 1922)

The press release published on the morning of the première, and which was presumably penned by Pierre Frondaie, finishes as follows:

7 December 1922... upon waking, having brought together the elements which God... and 1922 had put at his disposal, he tied up all things fantastical in three acts and six tableaux, gave his final instructions to the *apparent absurdity*... and, twenty-four hours late, chimed the hour of our hysterical laughter.

Locus Solus had been booked by Firmin Gémier before he left the management of the Théâtre Antoine and took over the Odéon. Pierre Frondaie owed the success of *L’Insoumise* to him, and went out of his way to thank him:

FAUSTINE. Who was Danton? An actor?... Somebody like Gémier?

CANTAREL. Yes, but less revolutionary.

It was Gémier's successor, M. Duplay, who produced *Locus Solus*. The dress rehearsal of this play in three acts and six tableaux took place on 7 December 1922, at two p.m. The opening night, initially scheduled for the same day at eight-thirty in the evening, finally took place the next day, Friday 8 December.

The programme states: "Music by M. Maurice Fouret, sets by M. Émile Bertin, costumes by Poiret". It then gives the cast in order of appearance:

<i>1st Man in furs</i>	MM.	Delaitre
<i>2nd Man in furs</i>		Stebler
<i>3rd Man in furs</i>		Pierre Garnier
<i>4th Man in furs</i>		Numès fils
<i>Cantrel</i>		Signoret
<i>Nointel</i>		Galipaux
<i>Faustine</i>	Mlle	Zabeth Capazza
<i>1st Judge</i>	MM.	Saturnin Fabre
<i>2nd Judge</i>		Morton
<i>Valet</i>		Noël
<i>Clerk of the Court</i>		Georges Flateau

Ballets

First Act

Dance in the Diamond	Mlle	Zabeth Capazza
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Second Act

Ballet of Glory	Lysana
Underwater Ballet	Lysana
Dance of the Doll	Jasmine

Third Act

Ballet of the Dominoes

Apotheosis

Ballet of Glory

<i>The Romantic Poet</i>	MM.	Géo Laby
<i>The Political Orator</i>		Marchand
<i>Fortune</i>	Mlles	Diane Belli
<i>The Skeletons</i>		Fabry
		Denise Boyer
		O'Klam
		Maryse Savy
		S. d'Ijouï
		Zellini
		Elianne
		Paulette Harmand
		Brunet
		Maziehl
<i>Glory</i>		Lysana

Underwater Ballet

<i>The Starfish</i>	Mlles	Diane Belli
<i>The Seaweed</i>		Fabry
<i>The Fish</i>	,	Mynka
<i>The Sailor</i>	M.	Mars
<i>The Sea-horses</i>	Mlles	S. d'Ijouï
		Zellini
		Elianne
		Paulette Harmand
		Denise Boyer
		O'Klam
		Maryse Savy
<i>Khóng-děk-lèn (Faustine's cat)</i>		Francia
<i>Faustine</i>		Zabeth Capazza
<i>The Coral Branch</i>		Lysana

Ballet of the Dominoes

<i>The Dominoes</i>	Mlles	S. d'Ijouï
		Zellini
		Elianne
		Paulette Harmand
		Denise Boyer
		O'Klam
		Maryse Savy
<i>A Domino</i>		Diane Belli
<i>The Queen of Hearts</i>		Lysana
<i>The King of Hearts</i>	M.	Mars

And all hell broke loose!

During the "emerald male" passage, the audience became angry, started booing and throwing forty-*sou* coins at the actors.

They narrowly missed Erbafe [Saturnin Fabre], causing his hat to fall off and him to leap backwards. But Signoret was injured.

In a panic, he went up to the prompter's box and begged the audience to:

"Throw bank-notes instead!"

The full dress-rehearsal, remarked Nozière (8 December), was "relatively quiet during the first two acts. But, in the middle of the third, the audience became angry. Tired of listening to such nonsense, some spectators started to protest. M. Signoret gravely reminded them that they were the ones who had been invited and that they should have more respect for the play. They shouted back: 'And you should have more respect for yourself!'"

"M. Signoret reminded us that we were all guests and that our duty was to remain silent," wrote Jane Catulle-Mendès (8 December).

And yet, when Signoret began to swing around in mid-air, the crowd became so raucous at the sight of "the tomfoolery the actor was indulging in" that he could think of nothing better to do than wink back at them lewdly. "Something which is definitely not done," murmured Franc-Nohain to his son Jean Nohain, who was also present.

Pierre Frondaie, “who was standing behind me during the performance,” (wrote Roger Vitrac) “was laughing fit to burst. He could not understand why I was clapping, *thinking that I was doing it out of mockery, or irony*. ‘Really,’ he said between two outbursts, playing on the fact that nobody knew about his having worked on the play and enjoying the joke against the ‘Raymond-Rousselians’, ‘really, you can’t mean it?’ And he sniggered when I told him that I was not in a laughing mood, and, what is more, that I intended to laugh later and longer, or else, when the wind had turned, to watch him become serious once more, something which has frequently happened.”

Georges Courteline listened intently and did not laugh either: “*Locus Solus...*?” he said. “Well, it seems to me that *Ubu Roi* has now sunk to the level of Casimir Delavigne.”*

Pierre Veber gives us an idea of the frankly hostile tone of the critics:

The critics did not bat an eyelid, so several spectators felt duty bound to protest. M. Signoret, sensing danger, cut one tableau. In fact, we were all rather disappointed. We were expecting something even more deranged! As it was quite simply over-long, tedious and totally ridiculous, people started protesting. A paying audience, thereby less indulgent, will probably become infuriated. We all know how far such things can go. It would be a pity to re-run the battle of *Hernani* over such a gloomy piece of fantasy, conceived in a run-down shack.

Ten years later, Roussel was still devastated:

There was an indescribable uproar during the première. Battle was joined, for this time, if almost the entire audience was against me, I did have a group of enthusiastic supporters.

Everyone spoke about it and my name suddenly became a household word.

But, far from being a success, it caused a scandal. For, apart from the small group of backers whom I have mentioned, everybody else worked himself up into a frenzy against me.

As one journalist put it: “It was a river of fountain pens”. Once more, I was called a madman or a prankster. All of the critics muttered cries of indignation.

This is not exactly true. Many of the critics were indeed hostile: André Beaunier, Henri Klotz in *La Presse*, Régis Gignoux and Armory in *Comœdia*, Gaston Lebal, Edmond Sée, Guillot de Saix, Paul Ginisty, Antoine, Pierre Veber, Maurice Prax, Albert Dalimier, Lucien Dubech, and so on. Gaston de Pawlowski regretted that: “the audience was little suited to this sort of fantasy.” Max and Alex Fischer were absolutely scornful:

A, e, i, o, u, drum, Central Africa, hydrogen peroxide, zounds, cigarette paper, Napoleon I, little salt spoon, the platform of an omnibus, Petrograd, tum, tum, tiddly, tum, peanuts, the Côte d’Azur, cannibals, Mandel, phylloxera, Sarah Bernhardt, *l, m, n, o, p, q*, ahaa! ahaaaa!, “Good morning, Madam”. [...] The reason why we have written the gibberish you have just read is that there seems to us to be no better way to give you a vague idea of the gibberish contained in the play we have just seen.

* A writer (1793-1843) of conventional historical dramas. [Trans.]

But the Fischer brothers perhaps had an excuse. Act I, scene X features an attack on these critics, which we must attribute to Pierre Frondaie. He, too, must have held something against them:

CANTAREL. There's an ass with two heads!

2ND JUDGE. Who's that?

CANTAREL. The thingummy brothers.

2nd JUDGE. The thingummy brothers?

CANTAREL. The ones who write in the newspapers! The thingummy brothers! They are an ass with two heads!

We can now understand why the Fischer brothers were not so amused.

Roussel also had his supporters. Among the critics, there was Alfred Savoir, who wrote: "The play is not lacking in a certain charm and it is far more intriguing than many so-called serious plays." And Édouard Dujardin who, five months later, published a piece in *La Revue de l'Époque* (May 1923):

I can recall my impressions of the performance of *Locus Solus*, which was for me a marvellous evening.

Imagine a work in the tradition of *Ubu Roi* and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*: an apparent buffoonery, but one which conceals a meaning, rapid shortcuts which create an impression of eccentricity, but which finally cause a feeling of dread. I am quite aware of what I am doing when comparing the name of Raymond Roussel with that spoiled child genius who was Alfred Jarry and that great mind and great poet that Apollinaire was to become... It must not be forgotten that *Impressions d'Afrique*, Raymond Roussel's previous play, dates back to 1913 and thus preceded *Les Mamelles*; we must see him as a precursor even though Apollinaire (who would have loved him) did not know him, which is much to the latter's credit.

Amidst apparent insanity, the inventor, the genius, the play's central character, stands so full of life and power that, I must admit, he towers above the characters in Apollinaire's play.

This genius is surrounded by people who are so strange and so human, for instance, the two judges! (Excepting the part played by M. Galipaux, the interest of which eluded me.) And the whole thing throbs with such life, at once grotesque and powerful, and a fancy that reaches the doors of madness and of dread. Thus, at the end of the play, when the genius has been left abandoned, deciding to take refuge in his thoughts, and thanks to the stage-hands flies up into the air and floats there, floats there until the curtain comes down... I said that I could remember a marvellous evening. I should have said it was bitter sweet.

Among his supporters was a small group of youngsters, the Surrealists, and Roger Vitrac:

After the performance I decided to go and see him, come what may. Along with a few friends, we managed to force our way through. Was it him, that man with the teeth?*

"Monsieur Raymond Roussel?"

"It is I."

A moment's surprise. We stammered out a few apologies, our admiration, and so on.

"Yes," he said. "There was a bit of a din, wasn't there? We shall have to make a few cuts, then it will work perfectly."

* We cannot resist mentioning that, among the strange articles discovered in Roussel's personal belongings which were given to the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, there features a single suede glove and... a tooth in a razor box.

But, of course, it was Raymond Roussel's wealth that came in for the most violent criticism. He himself said that his play was performed "with great pomp" at the Théâtre Antoine, and it is this luxuriousness which people found disturbing. Among the most virulent critics was, once again, Pierre Veber:

No, I refuse to be had! I shall not become indignant and, in my philippics, give publicity to M. Roussel the author of *Locus Solus*. Is this man quite simply a crackpot? Or is he a prankster making fun of us all? Or even both? I must admit that problems of literary history do not interest me. It is, of course, sad that someone can, because he possesses a large fortune, have his hare-brained productions played on a public stage, while so many writers of genius search in vain for an opening. But M. Roussel is not the only one to believe that "well-ordered sponsorship begins at home". The *Orontes* is submerging us, and the theatre is now no more than a sport of millionaires. I have heard that M. Roussel has spent a ridiculous amount on producing this piece of pretentious nonsense, which he has entitled *Locus Solus*. He has obtained the co-operation of great actors who must have been paid richly to appear in such an *impoverished* scheme! [...]

I even think that it is wrong to see any gaiety in this rather sad spectacle. A penniless loon gets taken away to the asylum; a rich nutter can walk the streets, hire a theatre and place articles in the press. He escapes from the straitjacket... Shall I give you my opinion of those persons who unabashedly take advantage of this unfortunate madman?... No, really, I would rather not.

But Roussel was indulgence made flesh: in 1924, he thanked Pierre Veber!

Fantasio of 1 January 1923 gave additional information. The columnist who signed himself "A Paying Pig" under the heading "The Pond of Curs" (illustrated by a cartoon by Bills: "An evening of madness — Signoret [holding Danton's head in his hands] and Galipaux in *Locus Solus*") seems particularly well-informed:

M. Raymond Roussel is [...] a multi-millionaire. He is the son of a stockbroker who had, it is said, a fortune of 80 million francs. He is the brother of the Duchesse d'Elchingen.

The performances of *Locus Solus*, with a mere thirty spectators each evening, will have cost him just 700,000 francs, for the actors earn between 200 and 1000 francs per evening; 9000 francs of daily takings were assured for an over-long period, the costumes cost 100,000 francs, some props were ridiculously expensive, etc....

It is true that Signoret received 13,000 francs for the ten performances, and Léon Morton, a judge, 300 francs per show. As for the fifty costumes made by Poiret, they cost 50,000 francs.

Let us stop there, rather than hurt the feelings of that well-known dramatist who agreed to "collaborate" with M. Roussel anonymously, but not for nothing. It is even said that a hundred lovely thousand-franc bank-notes...

Let us not insult M. Signoret, a great actor who has indulged in this tomfoolery.

Here is where money can lead the theatre. Should we be indignant, or just shrug our shoulders? What is certain is that the title of the play must now be changed. Instead of *Locus Solus*, it should be called *Loco Solo*.

On 11 December, Lucien Dubech put his oar in:

M. Roussel can be styled the author-justified-only-by-his-wealth. I have heard that he has spent a million putting on *Locus Solus*. He paid for the theatre, the actors, the musicians, the dancers and the walk-on roles in this absurdity. And how much will he pay us for having endured it? As for me, I say we are quits but on one condition: that he earns his pardon by paying one million to the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.

But it is surely Maurice Prax who wins first prize with his article in *Le Petit Parisien*, under the tear-jerking title "There are Better Things to Do":

Well, some might say, this fellow has the right to spend his money as he sees fit! If he preferred to ruin himself by betting on horses, on poker or on the Stock Market, then who would stop him, who would protest?

But the problem here is different.

The gambler who loses the shirt off his back when sitting down at the baccarat table is not taking the place of a man who needs to earn a living. An eccentric millionaire, who fills a theatre with his uproarious rabble, closes that theatre to authors of talent, to professionals whose plays remain shut up in cardboard boxes in the secretary's office while this cack-handed performance takes place.

The spendthrift who ruins himself does not ask people to pay twenty francs in order to watch his excesses. He does not derive glory or vanity from his madness. Rather, he conceals what he is doing.

But, clambering up on to the boards to ape an epileptic fit is, really, a strange notion...

Particularly in this day and age.

Is this eccentric author really sure that there are not more pleasant ways of spending the huge sums he is merrily throwing away on the stage, while taking the risk of being considered rather unfavourably?

Has this eccentric author not read the recent, moving appeal for funding French science? Has he never heard of poverty, paupers bringing up their families, students in distress, the terrible predicament of the unemployed?

Has he never met a poor man?

Yesterday, did he not read in the *Gaulois* the heart-rending account of a visit to that fine old poet Maurice du Plessys [then aged sixty]? On the seventh floor of a dreary house, in a frozen garret, the completely paralysed poet lies on his bed, alone... His wife, who runs a news kiosk, leaves every morning and returns at night. And there are two children to feed. And he is paralysed.

Oh, what about doing good? That must surely be far more comforting, in the end — and even more agreeable and joyous! — than playing the fool on stage.

A cartoon by Carlo Rim in the edition of *Comœdia* for 12 December shows two regular theatre-goers in evening suits exchanging these words: "Ah! There goes the author!" To which the other replies: "So young, so rich and so much to blame!" Roger Vitrac rather thought that Roussel's wealth was the "root of the problem", and quoted this line spoken by Cantarel who, thinking over the tragic destiny of a young poet, exclaims: "Oh, if I were poor, then I should be a genius! But I am rich." According to Vitrac, Raymond Roussel was most insistent that Signoret should emphasise certain lines, and in particular that this one should be cried out. But how sure can we be that it was written by Raymond Roussel himself and not by Pierre Frondaie?

The conclusion of this scandal was drawn by the management of the Théâtre Antoine — unless it was by Raymond Roussel, or even Pierre Frondaie — the day after the première and blazoned on a publicity poster:

The first performance of
LOCUS SOLUS
at the Théâtre Antoine
was a MARVELLOUS evening.
Come along!

Whatever the critics had to say, the show was certainly worth seeing. Pierre Veber, ever the begrudger, wrote: “The action takes place in Cubist sets which have been copied from *Dr Caligari*: they are dreary and dull, and as wearisome as the text.” This does an injustice both to the film and to Émile Bertin (who was presumably suggested by Pierre Frondaie, having recently designed the sets for *L’Insoumise*); for “Bertin knew the art of arranging cubes in fantastic *décor*”. In an interview published in *Le Petit Parisien* of 16 December, he told the director Edmond Roze: “I wanted to produce an ‘Expressionist’ *décor*. I left nothing to chance. I called in my friends from the atelier who, more advanced than me, are working with Cubism, and they soon convinced me that this was the way to exteriorise the thousand ‘cubes’ and thousand facets of M. Roussel’s thought.” It is a pity that the models, with one exception, have disappeared. But Pierre Frondaie was certainly behind this observation of Cantarel, who insists that he is not a “Cubist intellectual”: “I am no Cubist and I have no Dada.”*

Émile Bertin complained of being hampered by the costumes and by the play itself:

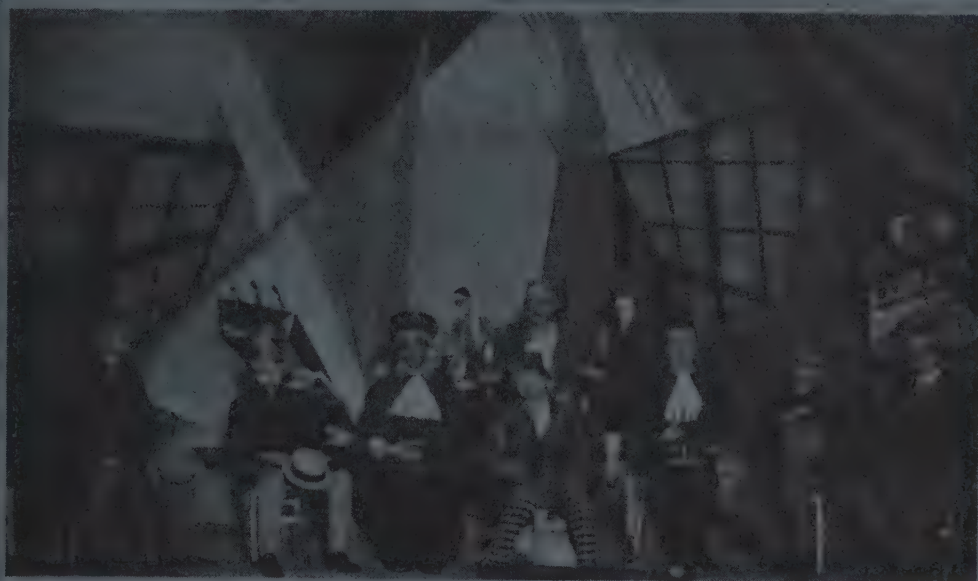
Bertin did his utmost. The lighting did not always satisfy him and in particular he regretted that the costume-makers had not worked with him more closely.

But, if the direction of *Locus Solus* brought nothing new and left us rather disappointed as to its intended originality, it was the subject itself which was lacking in the desired depth.

The costume designer, who was none other than Paul Poiret, returned from America at the beginning of autumn 1922. When making the fifty costumes for *Locus Solus*, he was able to apply his motto: “The costume makes the character”.

“The costumes, by Poiret,” (wrote Albert de Peyronnet on 9 December) “are extremely witty. They are designed to be ‘Dadaist’, hence the artistic aspect has not been excluded. As proof it is sufficient to mention, for example, Capazza’s robe of silver and light, Jasmine’s highly amusing costume, Galipaux’s tweed suit and the great Signoret’s comical dress. *Locus Solus* is going to be a turning-point.”

* A pun, “Dada” meaning both the avant-garde movement, and ■ “hobby-horse”.



ACTE II. — De gauche à droite : HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Stebler). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Namias fils). — 1^{er} JUGE (M. S. Fabre). — LE VALET (M. Noël). — CANTIER (M. Signoret). — 2^e JUGE (M. Morton). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Delaire). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Garnier).

AU THEATRE ANTOINE LOCUS SOLUS



ACTE I. — De gauche à droite : HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Garnier). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Namias fils). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Stebler). — HOMME AUX FOURNEAUX (M. Delaire). — NOUVEAU (M. Galipaux). — CANTIER (M. Signoret). — 1^{er} JUGE (M. S. Fabre).

This is proven by the photographs published in *Le Théâtre et Comœdia Illustré* of January 1923.

Then there was the music, which Willy appreciated, and which upset the routine of the Théâtre Antoine. In a letter dated 5 December to A. Rondel, the theatre's secretary apologised for not being able to provide two tickets to the dress rehearsal, "the placement of the orchestra having taken up two rows of seats". In the *Comœdia* of 8 December, a columnist who signed himself "G.L." emphasised the interest of the music:

M. Maurice Fouret has written a significant score of theatre music for *Locus Solus* including two preludes, that for the second act being of a particularly fine form and sonority, an interlude, two ballets, which feature especially ingenious harmonic combinations, and a series of "entrances" or brief commentaries, which are often just amusing airs of a few bars designed to illustrate or punctuate the action. I was expecting something shocking, and so was pleasantly surprised to hear such well written music, of a vibrant tonality as is fit in such a context, with often unpredictable harmonies, but which are constructed on a solid base, and whose development is rigorously precise in its apparent irony, proceeding from an irreproachable technique. I do not employ this term lightly. [...] M. Fouret is witty, tactful and has a sense of measure. He intends to show that he is determined to be progressive but not preposterous.

What this columnist evidently did not know was that Raymond Roussel was a musician, and surely would not have allowed Maurice Fouret to provide a "preposterous" score.

Locus Solus is no ordinary play. The unusual music accompanied the large amount of dancing: two dances ("the dance in the diamond" and "the dance of the doll") and three ballets ("the ballet of Glory", "the underwater ballet" and "the ballet of the dominoes"), the last of which "nearly had some success", according to Pierre Veber, but was cut from subsequent performances.

The actors were selected with a view to attracting the public. Roussel was open-handed and paid them what they wanted. When observing how hard it would be to make one of the lines work, which, despite its dullness, Roussel was particularly keen on keeping, Pierre Frondaie exclaimed in desperation: "To make that work we'd need Sarah Bernhardt!" Roussel replied: "Do you think she would accept? How much would she want?"*

The amazed audience laughed
To see Signoret the artist
Who, like a bird of ill omen,
Was wearing Caligari's mask.
Galipaux, when Capazza went by, somersaulted
Flateau the flatterer laid flat on the boards
And Lysana has taken us for a ride
In the waves where monsters go paddling.†

* Reported by Mme Frondaie. (Sarah Bernhardt died the following year, in 1923.)

† Versified column, signed "*Le Chauffeur de Fours*", 22 December 1922.

In his article of 9 December, Pierre Scize analysed the actors' performances:

M. Signoret struggled through *Locus Solus* in a smug Caligariism. It was child's play for such a great actor to sink to such whimsicality. He was, as usual, extraordinary [...]; M. Galipaux plays stooges in revues. He is aloof, agitated and carefree; M. Morton, as a black judge, thin and dyspeptic, is pleasing; M. Saturnin Fabre has a thoroughly jolly way of crying out: "Careful!" each time the doctor is about to pronounce an absurdity; M. Flateau is an amusing and picturesque clerk; Mme Zabeth Capazza brims over with good intentions. She dances, sings and pronounces absurdities with the wide eyes of innocence; Milles Lysana and Jasmine dance in their usual agile, witty and acrobatic way.

In 1925, Signoret told *Paris-Soir*: "I have been booed only twice: 1st in *La Terre* by Zola, where I played Buteau; 2nd in *Locus Solus* by Raymond Roussel. That evening, battle was joined. I tried in vain to impose the text, which had been difficult to learn, but which seemed to me to be strange, original and new, amid a chorus of boos and assorted cries."

The day after the last night, Roussel inscribed a copy of the novel of *Locus Solus* to him: "To the great Signoret, to the admirable creator of Canterel at the Théâtre Antoine, from the grateful author. R.R. 22 December 1922."

Signoret claimed that, when he asked him about the rails of veal lights (the eternal question!), Roussel replied: "They are designed for electoral trains" [a pun on *électoraux* and *taureaux*, "bulls"); which simply proves that he had a decided tendency to elaborate.

Raymond Roussel wanted his text to be scrupulously respected. When, during a rehearsal, Morton called Signoret "Cantagrel", a deeply worried Roussel went up to him and said: "Dear friend, it's Cantrel, not Cantagrel. I absolutely insist on the correct name... It's in the novel, you see?" (Which is not quite right, since his name is in fact "Canterel".)

In his memoirs, Saturnin Fabre, who had just played in Pierre Frondaie's *L'Insoumise*, was a curious victim of amnesia: "In *Locus Solus*, Erbafe played the role of an inventor. [In fact, it was Signoret; Fabre was the "first judge".] Here are some of his fantasies:

"The bath of hydrogen peroxide for dirty doctors and hairdressers. The cutlets of Sauternes for famished Gascons. The flashing nougat with a fuse. The solar wine. The future revealed by a musical tarot in need of an emerald!..."

But he did admit to having been given "a marvellous solid-gold cigarette case" which was stolen from him during the Nazi Occupation in 1944. "This sumptuous present was given to him by M. Raymond Roussel, the munificent author of *Locus Solus*."

An anonymous article published in *La Volonté* of 2 August 1933 states: "He had a generous heart and gave freely to his actors. One evening, while tying the tie of his

main protagonist [Signoret], he cried out: 'No pin!' And, as one decorates a hero, he himself stuck a diamond in that silk tie as a token of gratitude."

But these fabulous gifts annoyed the critics. René Wisner said: "When seeing *Locus Solus* played by such actors as MM. Signoret, Morton, Galipaux, Flateau and Saturnin Fabre, I could not stop myself from saying: 'My God! People will do anything for money!'" And, in a letter to Roger Vitrac dated 21 January 1927, Régis Gignoux wrote: "M. Raymond Roussel is a sick man, but also very rich. He is free to be a genius. The only annoying thing is to see how his mania is exploited in the theatres, and by quality actors who agree to perform for him while cruelly mocking him."

The most virulent was Antoine himself. True enough, the play he was criticising was being performed in a theatre that had the same name as him, which must have made him think that he had a certain liberty. Under the title "Is it time to wake up?", he published an initial article on 9 December:

You know the sort of minor scandal set off by the performance of such an incoherent play, and so might wonder if the author had not, quite simply, decided to see how far he could go with this tomfoolery in testing Parisian audiences' patience? But this audience, which was not in the know, and was paying a heavy price, at last became angry: after two hours' mortal boredom, faced with such puerile aggressiveness, it finally awoke and poor Signoret was taught a lesson.

What the devil was he doing in such nonsense? He does not, as his comrades do, have the excuse of having to earn a living, come what may. He is just back from a lucrative South-American tour and has no difficulty finding work in Paris; this is, from him, proof of a singular imprudence, given that we remember that it was on this very stage that he won his first plaudits.

To judge the responsibilities fairly, we must bear in mind the circumstances that allowed such a show to be put on: in them, we find the money-grabbing which is yearly ever more strangling our poor theatre.

The other day, faced with the sluggish response of the public before such an incongruous spectacle, I wondered if this absurdity would win through to the end. But, at last something cracked, and there was a shameful and deserved *débâcle*. If this is the true awakening of a public that has decided to preserve the dignity of our theatre, which too many self-interested people are sully, then the day was not lost.

Two days later, on 11 December, André Antoine published a second article:

... It is to be deplored that the Society of Authors cannot protect the dignity of one of Paris's main literary theatres. If one must pardon the actors who, being forced to earn a living, must accept such chores, then Signoret, who richly earns his, has just uselessly compromised himself in an adventure the outcome of which can never have been in doubt; this is why the public treated him quite severely and it is to be hoped that he will learn from this lesson. [...] What a shame it is to see so much money wasted, and above all a theatre monopolised in mid-season, when talented authors have so much difficulty in reaching their public!

And that was not all. For Antoine was to attack Roussel again in 1924, resulting in a minor scandal.

Nevertheless, we may wonder how Raymond Roussel would have managed to get his plays performed if he had not used his personal wealth. The Roussel miracle (for such it is) is simply this: if he had not spent huge sums on his books and plays, none of them would have seen the light of day.

In the same article, Antoine cried victory with a little too much haste: "The performance ended with a total *débâcle* and the curtain fell on the disorientated actors. And, the next day, the play had vanished from the billboards. Bravo!"

What is this mystery? [asked Léo Marchès on 10 December.] The guests and paying spectators, who had come to the première, were surprised to find on the doors of the closed theatre a sign that read as follows:

"Owing to an accident with the props, performances of *Locus Solus* have been postponed until further notice."

As regards the props, at the full dress-rehearsal we above all admired the strange costumes, and a few inspired pieces of direction, such as the hollow diamond full of hydrogen peroxide, and Danton's head speaking into Galipaux's ear.

Perhaps the diamond has been emptied of its hydrogen peroxide or maybe Danton's head has become dumb?

Your guess is as good as mine.

This "accident with the props" was perhaps not totally imaginary. We know that the "underwater ballet" required the on-stage presence of large cardboard sea-horses, while the wires holding the "human Cartesian divers" went up and down, as did, according to Roger Vitrac, "statues, wreaths and a massive *Légion d'honneur*" (but he was presumably mixing this up with the "ballet of Glory"). All of which can hardly have been simple. But the truth lay elsewhere. "We shall have to make a few cuts," Raymond Roussel had told Vitrac and his friends. What is more, Pierre Frondaie, as a seasoned playwright, had wished the play were shorter, and preceded by a curtain-raiser. He was concerned that the inventiveness of *Locus Solus* would soon weary the spectators. Roussel had refused. But now, because of public pressure, cuts would have to be made. It is even said that Roussel's sister, the Duchesse d'Elchingen, had been shocked by the ballet of the Cartesian divers.

The *New York Times* published an article regretting the fact that, despite the ballets, Maurice Fomet's "ultra-modern" music and Poirer's magnificent costumes, Paris still did not have a Cubist theatre, and also announced that as of 9 December, performances had been suspended.

The third act was the one that was sacrificed, with its "ballet of the dominoes". A white label was simply stuck over the programme. It was replaced by a one-act curtain-raiser, with two characters, which was a sort of patriotic farce: *La Guerre en pantoufles*, by Gabriel Timmory and Félix Galipaux. It was performed by Galipaux himself, in the role of Gaston, and by Suzanne Goldstein, in the role of Huguette.

But his supporters had also made their voices heard. Raymond Roussel had

picked them out well and, the day after the performance, he sent a signed copy of *Locus Solus* to Michel Leiris, then aged twenty-one, as well as his brothers Pierre and Jacques, with the following inscription:

to Michel Leiris, to my warmest defender of yesterday at the first night of *Locus Solus*, with my gratitude and affection.

Then he wrote to him again on 10 December:

My dear Michel,
I was extremely touched by your beautiful letter, which I am going to keep as a precious document concerning the riotous opening night of *Locus Solus*.

When Pierre telephoned me this morning, he mentioned that you would like to have a copy of the novel. I have already sent you a signed copy, the day after the battle, with an allusion to the warmth of your behaviour.

I thank you with all my heart and send you a thousand affectionate thoughts.

Raymond Roussel.

The performances, which had been suspended on Saturday 9 December, resumed on Monday 11. The play now had only two acts and five tableaux. Advertisements appeared in the press, as well as a leader in various papers on 12 and 13 December. One of them began with the words "We have heard that *Locus Solus* has risen." This "we have heard" is a way of making clear that the news had come from a press release from the theatre. Sure enough, a second article used the same phrase in its headline: "*Locus Solus* has risen."

Dear public!

You thought me dead. Did you not know that I possess the secret of "resurrectine"? Pens, even when wielded by critics, cannot kill. Yet, when they stuck in my machinery, they jammed the cogs. I have now repaired this. Here I am alive once more and bringing to life my six tableaux.

That said, I have tidied up my laboratory a little, put away my tarot packs and emeralds; theatrical means are too limited to realise my imaginings, which reduces me to describing them to you, even though you would have loved to see them come alive on stage. If they excite your curiosity, then read the book I published under the pseudonym Raymond Roussel; you will find them there, with a thousand other astounding inventions.

But why shouldn't you come?

What promise did my street-criers make that I did not keep? Fouret's music? Bertin's sets? Poirer's inventiveness? They have been praised all round. My evocation of glory, and my underwater entertainment? They have been accused only of being too short! Has anybody criticised Signoret, Morton, Fabre, Flateau or Galipaux? Some say they have dishonoured themselves!!! Yet not one of them flaunts his underwear... Your children can come to see me, too!

My inventions? My strange juxtapositions? Did they not make the first audience laugh? They laughed, believe you me. The only thing is, when you have read, heard or seen a few good jokes, you dry your merry tears and say: "How stupid I am to laugh like that." People

were ashamed at having laughed, because they thought you were watching them and so they said: "God, how *stupid* it is."

No, I have not hoodwinked you. I have, I think, given you ample warning of my originality.

And you, you do not come to judge me; you pay to have fun, to be entertained and amused. Whether I am talented, mad, a genius or a practical joker... what the d... do you care so long as you laugh!

So, see you this evening, dear public... Till tomorrow, each evening, as long as you want.*

One of these articles is signed: CANTAREL.

As for Signoret, he had the strange idea of replacing part of the third act with a scene in which the actors insulted the audience!† "We did not even have the strength to make audible the protestations that had been written into the last scene of the text and had to resort to a few well-placed hecklers in the audience to overcome the weariness which would alone have welcomed the concluding lines."‡ R. Millet entitled his article in *L'Avenir* for 18 December: "It's the modern *claque*... The 'Romans' no longer clap, they call the author a madman":

Contrary to what I had been told, the show on stage amused me far more than the one in the stalls. When I did glance at the scattered occupants of the orchestra stalls, I noticed no outward sign of either indignation or admiration: all I saw were gaping mouths, astonished stares and stunned ears. In the dress circle, the audience was neither more numerous nor less well-behaved. At one point, some people burst out laughing. This phenomenon occurred near the end of Act I. The "*claque*" had already made its presence felt on several occasions, without provoking the slightest protest. But, when it emphasised the final scene of the first act, a loud voice cried out: "Eye-wash!"; a second Stentor added: "It's idiotic!"; and a third: "Put them in the nut-house!"

During Act II, the same exchanges occurred in the audience on several occasions, and with mechanical precision. Were they being broadcast by phonographs? No, for after careful scrutiny and at the risk of contracting a ricked neck, it was possible to single out the men who were heckling the author and his supporters. They were up in the balcony, near the *claque*; their lack of decorum rather put out the people in the orchestra stalls and dress circle. But no blows were exchanged and their faces expressed either good humour, or total indifference. The three police sergeants who were watching the door did not bother these demonstrators at all, despite the rule that states that it is forbidden to disturb the peace in theatres and concert halls.

The idea of this novel sort of *claque* had no doubt been suggested to the management of the theatre by the scandal caused by Roger Vitrac and his friends — Louis Aragon, M. Josephson, Benjamin Péret, Paul Éluard and Max Morise, who all signed one of André Breton's calling-cards "with their admiration" and sent it to Raymond Roussel the day after the first public performance, which was also attended by Georges Auric and Francis Picabia. They were scattered throughout the theatre and kept clapping and calling out. The spectators grew irritated and finally

* Roger Vitrac quotes this article from a newspaper which has a misprint in the fourth paragraph: "Why *won't* you come?" instead of "Why *shouldn't* you come?" He concludes that the future tense implies "the certainty that any attempt will be in vain". As opposed to Roger Vitrac and Jean Ferry, I think that this paid-for *quid* was written by Pierre Frondaie and not by Roussel, who would hardly have penned the vulgarities in the penultimate paragraph.

† *Les Hommes du jour*, 30 December 1922. Unsigned article by Roger Vitrac.

‡ André Rivoire, *Le Temps*, 18 December 1922.

started shouting back. But, during *La Guerre en pantoufles*, the Dadas went over the top. They hissed and screamed: “Idiotic!”, “It’s fake!” Statements of patriotic feeling were greeted with: “Down with France! Long live Germany!” To an actor whose question “And so?” was greeted by silence, Aragon called down from the balcony: “So, shit!” That day, the management of the theatre, unused to this sort of thing, called the police. The actors sided with the audience to protest against these hecklers — who were defending Roussel’s play! André Breton and his wife were taken to the police station, but his protestations and enthusiastic comments on the play meant that he was soon released. Thanks to an article dated 31 December, we know that each actor was granted ten seats per performance, and that there were around one hundred friends of the author in attendance each evening — which is rather a lot for a man who was not supposed to have any friends...

Roussel attended every performance: “They are happy... they *understand*,” he said one day to the stage manager while listening to the noises from the audience (*La Volonté*, 2 August 1933).

As for Pierre Frondaie, he thought they should put a stop to the run. He wrote to Roussel, who replied:

Wednesday [13 December 1922].

Dear friend,

I agree to the modifications to be made to the sonnet.

I read your beautiful letter with great attention and shall think it over. In any case, all we can now do is wait, for no decision can be made after so few performances.

Forgive me for breaking off already; I have piles of letters to reply to.

Your friend and admirer.

Raymond Roussel.

Among these letters and parcels was a large-paper copy of *Les Champs magnétiques*,* signed only by André Breton:

to Raymond Roussel

for *Locus Solus*

the only play it has been my privilege to see.

André Breton,

12 December 1922.

And another letter from Michel Leiris, which he answered on 16 December:

Thank you, my dear Michel, for your strange and fascinating letter.

I see that, like me, you prefer the world of Conception to that of Reality.

The interest that you are good enough to have in my work is proof to me that, in you, I have rediscovered the affection that your father had for me, and I am profoundly touched.

With all my heart.

* Ex-Lucien Biton collection. The latter purchased several signed editions shortly after Roussel’s death in 1933 from a bookseller in Passage Jouffroy, from cases coming from the Hôtel Drouot.

Locus Solus ran until Thursday 21 December. "As we foresaw," a gossip column observed on Wednesday 27, "*Locus Solus* has lived its last (on Thursday night last). On Saturday, *L'Insoumise* will recommence its run at the Théâtre Antoine"... for just twenty nights. That same day, Léo Marchès concluded:

The career of *Locus Solus* will thus have lasted ten performances, which were sometimes rather rowdy, but never so much as to cause an affray or necessitate the intervention of those watchdogs who guard the well-being of our theatres. [...] The career of *Locus Solus* was short; but it was also good, if not for the author himself, then certainly for his circle.

It is quite possible that Roussel, having thought that the failure of the stage adaptation of *Impressions d'Afrique* was due to his lack of experience, now thought that Frondaie was to blame for the failure of *Locus Solus*. Certainly, in both his advice to his actors and in the puffs, Roussel insisted on the necessity of reading his novel. A gossip columnist of 13 December reported his saying: "Why did the play make people laugh? The novel is sad. I just don't understand. I just don't understand." He had posters printed to advertise the novel ("The novel that was dramatised at the Théâtre Antoine"), calling in Robert de Montesquiou's recent book, *Élus et Appelés*: "An infusorial art, but, I must add, the infusoria of a genius".* He had a paper strip wrapped around the book, which also used this quotation plus the following: "This is the book which gave birth to *Locus Solus*, the play performed at the Théâtre Antoine." *Le Cri de Paris* of 7 January 1923 seemed to sum up this feeling: "Those who saw *Locus Solus* curse those that sent them there. But none of those who will read the novel *Locus Solus* will curse the person who said 'Read it!' For the theatre has betrayed *Locus Solus*, and the book contains no disappointments." This last sentence was also used by Raymond Roussel on another green-coloured publicity strip, which Jean Ferry remembered having seen in the window of a bookshop in Nancy. The same point of view also emerges from a long article by Saint-Réal in *Le Gaulois*, a newspaper that was used to humouring Raymond Roussel. Under the headline: "After the battle — *Locus Solus* will no more be seen, but it will be read", it begins as follows:†

Raymond Roussel perhaps made a terrible mistake having *Locus Solus* performed in a theatre. But, despite everything, he will have no regrets if this has drawn the public's attention to the novel, which was published before the war by Lemerre;

and concludes:

Locus Solus is a book that is worth reading, which in fact requires re-reading. Despite all of the imaginative gifts that the author displays, it nevertheless comes across as the fruit of long reflection, of widely varied knowledge, and represents a labour that must have been long and arduous. This is why it should be read deeply and thoughtfully. Those who dislike the banality

* *Journal des Débats*, 14 December 1922.

† *Le Gaulois*, 17 February 1923.

of present-day novels will find what they are looking for in this truly original work, will understand all that its seeds contain and will not regret the time spent conversing with such a book.

Thus, when Roger Vitrac wrote, in 1928: "The play will never be published. What a shame," we could reply that Roussel was not at all favourable to such a project and that he now considered this adaptation to have just one point of interest: "No matter, there had been a result: the title of one of my works was now famous. That year, all the theatre revues featured a scene about *Locus Solus*, and two revues directly drew on it for their titles: *Cocus Solus* (which, more fortunate than my play, its godmother, ran for over a hundred nights) and *Blocus Solus ou les Bâtons dans les Ruhrs*."

Such was the price to be paid, if not for "glory", then at least fame. As far as Roussel was concerned, anything was better than being unknown, even mockery and derision.

The *New York Times* of 9 December 1922 had already underlined the failure in Paris of the first "Cubist" play, despite Poirer's costumes and Maurice Fomet's ultra-modern music. But the critics in France went further. The ridicule reached its peak with Jane Catulle-Mendès, in her column of 21 December:

L'Université de Paris, a student magazine, has published a vigorous protest against a recent play which cost a fortune, even though it was worthless. Our young colleagues point out how appalling it is that such sums can be thrown away, without assisting art, while so many young men cannot continue their studies for lack of funds. There is truth in this remark and it needed to be said.

Sure enough, in the issue for December 1922 of *L'Université de Paris*, a monthly magazine published by A, the following "vigorous" lines appear:

A PROTEST BY THE GENERAL ASSOCIATION OF STUDENTS

* Two years later, in his book *Le Quartier latin*, Jean Émile-Bayard wrote (p.137): "Thus, at the moment when a debt of honour is at last given them — in order to improve their material existence and to allow them to work at the university — let us not forget the protest of the General Association of Students which sent down critical thunderbolts on that piece of nonsense called *Locus Solus*, written by a poor intellectual multi-millionaire".

Many students currently live in poverty and, for want of a few francs, cannot eat their fill.

An individual, who no doubt considers himself an intellectual, has dug up a million to put on a piece of nonsense: *Locus Solus*.

The public has appreciated this work at its true value: however, there were still people in the theatre who applauded (unironically).

You can judge the nature of this play if you know that it begins with some undertaker's assistants carrying a coffin on to the stage, into which they pour a liquid to chill the corpse.

To spend such a sum at such a time on this sort of spectacle is the equivalent of throwing a piece of bread into the gutter.

And it would be totally wrong to try to hush up public protest, under the pretext that respect is due to the talented actors who performed it.

These actors are to be pitied! When will we decide to throw such harum-scarums into the Cloaca Maxima?*

Yet, can we not detect the same “tone” in this piece by François Mauriac, that was published in the *Revue hebdomadaire* of 23 December, after the last night:

A billionaire can buy everything: a theatre, Galipaux, costumes by Poiré [*sic*], Signoret, and, above all, the public's time. M. Roussel wished to write a madman's play, and succeeded only too well; for true madmen are not merry and his play is sinister indeed! But the public entered so meekly into all of his intentions, by shouting out, that the author must have been delighted. A million is not too much to be able to watch through a hole in the curtain “the princes of criticism” in full flight. *Locus Solus* cannot be described, because it is senseless. There is talk of rails of veal lights, of asthmatic army officers who are cured when someone blows into shoulder-knots... And there is a sort of dismal frenzy in this absurdity which, I must admit, did not leave me indifferent.

François Mauriac may indeed have had a vivid imagination, but we cannot help wondering where he saw all of that. But it was above all Édouard Dujardin who was right. The beginning of his article, published in *La Revue de l'Époque* in May 1923, deserves reprinting because it defends as well a “great principle” — intellectual honesty:

An injustice is an injustice: whether it be done to Croesus or to Diogenes, it is just as detestable. And, when it is a literary matter, then one's duty to protest is equally pressing.

A writer wrote a play; everything points to the fact that it came from his heart; he had the quite natural desire to see it performed; we know how hard it is to break into the great theatres of Paris; M. Raymond Roussel felt that he stood no chance of success; but he was born rich, it is even said extremely rich; so he thought that the easiest solution was to pay for the performances himself. I know a writer, who was not born at all rich, and who had also given up all hope of having his plays performed; he decided to use the money he had earned to hire a theatre and employ some actors. After all, there is no real difference between this and what most young poets do when they pay for their first book of verse to be published. But M. Roussel (if he will forgive my saying so) is not a dextrous millionaire; not only is he incapable of defending himself, but he allows himself to be outrageously exploited; he tolerates ridiculous publicity; because of his naïveté (obviously) and without knowing it (less obviously) he appears ostentatious; what I mean is that one feels there is money, piles of money, turning around his work; the simple nature of his clumsiness is precisely what, to my mind, pleads in his favour, but it exasperates the public; this inability to handle his fortune, his complete lack of understanding when it comes to Parisian sensibilities, mean it is hard to imagine a more disastrous condition for putting on a play; it is performed; what happens? Before listening to a line, before hearing a word, the critics lay siege to it and, alongside them, that well-known audience that attends dress rehearsals... If you write a favourable piece, they say you have been paid; and I shall not mention the insidious, vindictive anger of those who would have liked to have been paid! Among the others, I mean honest men, there will be a feeling (which is in fact understandable) that this gentleman, because he is rich and has spent money, must not be allowed to imagine that... And the best critics slate him, or else fall silent.

Well, all of that might well be human, but it is abominable that (so far as I know) there was not one single critic willing to listen to *Locus Solus* with the same ears as for a play written by any other writer.

The last word must go to Louis Schneider who, in *La Suisse* of 14 December, coldly observed: "I demand the setting-up of a theatrical vice squad to avoid any repetition of such scandals."

The last murmurs seemed to have died down. A disappointed Raymond Roussel went back to work on his next plays, which he was to write alone, and the *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, which was to be interrupted again. From 23 to 26 April 1923, Robert de Montesquiou's library was auctioned off. It was during the fourth session that Jacques Doucet, a spectator at the Théâtre Antoine, acquired the luxury edition of *Locus Solus* with Roussel's autograph letter enclosed. At the end of May, *Les Pas effacés* was published: Montesquiou's posthumous memoirs which, in volume three (p.78), sketch a rather unflattering portrait of Raymond Roussel. On 10 June, Pierre Loti died in Hendaye, where he had asked to be taken.

It was only on 13 July, seven months after the opening night, that Roussel wrote this inscription to Pierre Frondaie on a Japanese vellum copy of his novel from 1913:

To the admirable author of *L'Insoumise*
His friend
his admirer
Raymond Roussel, 13 July 1923.

Nothing more was to pass between them concerning the adaptation of *Locus Solus*.

IV
THE STAR ON THE
FOREHEAD
THE DUST OF SUNS
1923-1927



DIMINISHING CAPITAL

Was Raymond Roussel really that wealthy? Or was his wealth an illusion? At the beginning of 1923, Pierre Leiris, who looked after his investments, drew up an alarming statement.

In 1922, Raymond Roussel had spent 1,187,786 francs, and earned only 408,794; the deficit was thus 778,992 francs.

What is more, between 31 December 1921 and 31 December 1922, his real-estate investments had risen from 12,090,442 to 12,761,828 francs, giving a surplus of 671,386 francs, which was certainly comfortable, but did not cover his deficit. At the end of 1922, there was thus a shortfall of 107,606 francs. Roussel was beginning to eat into his capital.

Even before the crash of 1929, which was finally to ruin Roussel, Pierre Leiris was worried. How did Roussel react to these accounts when he received them? We do not know; but he certainly continued spending with no concern for the future.

FIRST ANTHOLOGIES

Roussel thus went on producing his plays, and publishing his books with Lemerre, to whom he remained faithful, but who blatantly ignored him. For example, between 1923 and 1924, Lemerre published the thirty-six issues of a review, *Nos Poètes*, edited by Maxime Formont, in which one might expect to find the poets published in Passage Choiseul. The name Roussel appears twice, but refers to a namesake, Pol Roussel, and not Raymond! It is difficult to imagine what the "real" Roussel must have thought when he read these two poems, *L'Inspiration* and *Soir à Versailles*.

While waiting for glory, Raymond Roussel was constantly to meet other Roussels, poets or prose-writers, who were often mistaken for him, as for example the novelist Romain Roussel, also published by Lemerre. According to Eugène Vallée, he had discovered an identical namesake and used to send him his books. It may have been him who received a copy of *Locus Solus* on Japanese vellum, with the following inscription:

to Raymond Roussel, given by his namesake, who will preciously keep his witty letter.

But he in fact kept only those from Blanche Roussel and Henri Rousselle.

In 1924, the first edition of *L'Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie française* was published by Éditions Kra. This time, Raymond Roussel was included, between Marcel Proust (a poem from *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*) and Robert de Montesquiou (*Les Hortensias bleus*), with extracts from *La Vue* and *La Doublure*. He thanked the editor for having sent him a copy, which was after all the least he could have done:

Sir,

It was with great pleasure that I saw in your curious anthology some of my verses presented to the reader in the most flattering terms. I thank you a thousand times for sending it to me and for your kind inscription.

Yours faithfully.

This was in fact the first time that Raymond Roussel's poetry had been included in an anthology, and even if this one seemed at first sight "curious" because of the modernity of the poets it featured, he would not often have the chance to read such a flattering description of himself:

Raymond Roussel was born on 20 January 1877. His childhood was untroubled, perhaps too much so. At first, he knew only toys, mechanical toys the workings of which he patiently took apart. People busied themselves around him. From his bedroom, he heard the distant sounds of parties. As a young man, life was easy, at least apparently so. He frequented the literary salons of the time, attended the most glittering and also the most elegant receptions. He slowly started to write. He hid himself away. Little by little, he preferred solitude and started travelling widely. He had already published *La Doublure* (1896) [*sic*], then *La Vue* (1903). *La Doublure* was his first book, and from the first page of this verse novel we discover Raymond Roussel's singular wit: "Since this book is a novel, it should be commenced on the first page and finished on the last. The Author". All of Roussel's books might easily be there to teach us how to read. There is no surprise in that. They dominate, then fascinate us. When we follow Roussel step by step, we constrict our minds, we see only the present. The author takes care of the future. Roussel's poetry is infinitely subtle. It looks easy, too easy in fact, then, suddenly, we realise that we have not understood, that we have to start again, and pull ourselves together. It is slow and raw. It spreads itself out, broadens and evaporates.

Raymond Roussel's influence is beginning to be felt and, each year, it grows stronger. In ten years' time, Roussel will be discovered by the general public.

Leaving aside the well-intended prophecy at the end, these comments are fairly astute. "All of Roussel's books might easily be there to teach us how to read." It would be hard to put it better.

The person who wrote this summary had obviously met Roussel; he had obtained certain biographical information which, though rather fantastical, is nevertheless rare enough to be welcome. Who was it? Léon-Pierre Quint? * It in fact seems that it was Philippe Soupault who wrote the notice. When Roussel sent him a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* on Japanese vellum in January 1927, with "the confraternal

* Raymond Roussel, *Lettre inédite à Léon-Pierre Quint* (1924), presented by J.-P. Goujon, Éditions "À L'Écart", 1991.

greetings of his Tahitian correspondent” (which proves that the two knew each other as early as 1920, if only by letter), he added:

My heartiest congratulations for your articles published in the Anthology, and my warmest thanks for the notice about me — for its kindness was even clearer to me than your signature.

Encouraged by this response, Philippe Soupault suggested to him that Kra should publish him instead of Lemerre. Roussel refused. At the beginning of 1927, Soupault also asked him for a short unpublished text for a new anthology, but in prose not in verse. Roussel then sent a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* on Japanese vellum to Simon Kra, with “compliments from the author, extremely proud to feature in his wonderful *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Prose française*”.

Of the twenty-five authors in this anthology, Raymond Roussel came fifth, after André Gide, Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry and Max Jacob, and before Léon-Paul Fargue. What more could he ask? The notice about him was written by the same hand as in the *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie*, and its anonymous author made no bones about recycling some of its sentences:

Raymond Roussel was born in Paris and lived there throughout his childhood. In summer, he was taken to the seaside, to fashionable beaches or gloomy *châteaux*. His childhood was untroubled. His only friends were mechanical toys, the workings of which he enjoyed taking apart. With them, he worked out long stories, which he dreamt up at night. People busied themselves around him, dancing and singing. From his bedroom, he heard the distant sounds of parties.

During the years of his youth, he frequented the literary salons, where he met Loti [untrue, but the writer of the notice seems not to have understood the real reason for the trip to Tahiti], Marcel Proust, J.-É. Blanche, Reynaldo Hahn [whom he must actually have met in his mother’s salon], etc. He wrote, but told nobody about it. He travelled and went round the world several times [?]. It is not easy to identify who has influenced Roussel. He is perhaps modern literature’s most original and most spontaneous [?] writer. He is not part of any group, claims nobody as a “master” and lives in the greatest isolation. He never asks for advice and publishes only to please himself.

There is no doubt that it is he who has discovered the marvels of modernity. His style is as precise as a machine and as mysterious as natural phenomena.

The bibliography that follows this notice mentions only *La Doublure*, *La Vue*, *Impressions d’Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, although *L’Étoile au Front* had already been published. Oddly enough, the extracts Roussel chose for this anthology were not strictly speaking “prose”, but dialogues from a play, *La Poussière de Soleils*, which were perhaps “unpublished” since the book was copyrighted only on 21 March 1927, although it had been “in print” since 8 June 1926.

THE ART LOVER

At this same time, Roussel seems to have become interested in new painting, through Michel Leiris. "Interested" is perhaps an exaggeration, since it was Michel Leiris who dragged him along to André Masson's studio at 45, Rue Blomet, in March 1924:

My dear Michel,
Thank you for your kind letter.

I should very much like to see Monsieur André Masson's exhibition. I intend to go there on Friday 7 March at about 5.30. I should be delighted if, as you lead me to believe, I can meet you there.

With my respectful compliments to Mme Leiris, I send you a thousand affectionate thoughts.
Raymond Roussel.

He bought a still life, attracted by its "transparency"; it is a set of objects lit by a candle in broad daylight, in which glasses (and their transparent nature) play a crucial role.

A calling-card addressed to Michel Leiris:

A thousand thanks, my dear Michel, for dedicating those highly original and penetrating verses to me. I have the impression that they could be used as a subject for a transparent painting by André Masson. Thanks again, and an affectionate bravo!

Raymond Roussel.

In his notebook (manuscript 186), Michel Leiris was later to write: "after the first Masson exhibition, where I took him. His affability towards Masson, who was then in dire straits". Another calling-card from Roussel to Leiris:

My dear Michel,

As an old friend, I am delighted to discover in you such qualities of originality and profound thought. The reader is always rewarded by the effort of concentration that you demand from him. An affectionate and warm bravo, to which I add my respectful compliments to Mme Leiris.

Raymond Roussel.

I was extremely touched by the interest of M. André-May.* Unfortunately I have no short pieces ready at the moment.

Remember me to M. André Masson.

Once again guided by Michel Leiris, Roussel also went to a Joan Miró exhibition. A calling-card:

My dear Michel,

I have been very busy these last few days and I rather thought that I was not going to be able to go to Joan Miró's exhibition. But just yesterday I found myself free quite by chance, which was too late to warn you. I greatly admired Joan Miró's works and even bought one. I am sorry to have missed this opportunity to see you and send you a thousand tokens of affection.

Raymond Roussel.

* Roussel's mistake for Pierre-André May, who founded the review *Intentions* in 1923, at the age of 21.

His niece Nicole Grimprel (Nicole Lecoq-Vallon) thought she remembered seeing a painting by the Douanier Rousseau in his house. Michel Leiris particularly noticed watercolours by Madeleine Lemaire: "In fact he quite openly admitted that painting bored him and that he knew nothing about the subject." Since he purchased a Masson, a Miró, and later a Max Ernst, it is tempting to think that he was interested in "modern art".* Michel Leiris was always clear about this: it was not through taste, but in order to do them a good turn, that he bought his friends' work. In 1920, he replied to someone seeking his patronage: "Personally, I cannot acquire your canvas, since I do not collect works of art."

And yet, Roussel was not totally indifferent to pictorial art. What he required from it — as we shall see with the work he commissioned from Zo — is more or less akin to what he wanted to obtain from words: precision. What he demanded from Zo is what he demanded from himself. He expected a perfectly faithful rendering from painting, just as he tried for the clarity of Pierre Loti's descriptions with a minimum number of words.

RAYMOND ROUSSEL AND WILLY

Rousselians will not be surprised to discover another writer who in 1923 became an admirer of Raymond Roussel's work: Willy — or to give him his real name, Henri Gauthier-Villars, who has been given an undeserved reputation as an exploiter of ghost-writers by his second wife, Colette. It was at the house of his father, a scientific publisher on Quai des Grands-Augustins, where Capitaine Colette was a frequent visitor, that he met the latter's daughter, Gabrielle-Sidonie. They married in 1893. Their first "joint venture", *Claudine à l'école*, was written in 1900. Before their estrangement, the young woman was extremely interested in "literature" (that is to say her husband's) which she described in the following terms to Marcel Proust in May 1895: "You can have no idea of how pleased Willy was by your letter, for you, I think, are the only one (although I believe Fénéon said the same thing) who has so clearly seen that for him words are not representations, but living things, and not so much mnemonic signs as pictorial translations".†

A set of letters from Roussel to Willy reveal the latter's admiration. Their relationship seems to have begun with the following inscription on a copy of *Locus Solus* on Japanese vellum:

To the creator of the immortal Claudine
confraternal compliments
24 October 1923.

Raymond Roussel.

* What happened to them? Did they end up in the flea market? Do their new owners know where they came from? Are they still lying forgotten in a box hidden away in a furniture warehouse?

† *Le Figaro littéraire*, 23 July 1964. See also: F. Caradec, *Feu Willy, avec et sans Colette*, 1984 — new edition being prepared.

Willy treasured Roussel's letters, and kept them inserted in this volume, which he went out of his way to hand over to his friend, Madeleine de Swarte, so that it would not be lost after his death, adding beneath Roussel's inscription: "To my dear little girl / the one and only Madeleine / [...] / Willy / March 1928."* But Raymond Roussel does not seem to have kept his admirer's letters.

In *La Suisse* of 3 November, Willy finished an article with the following "P.S.":

In his *Mémoires*, Robert de Montesquiou mentions his Neuilly neighbour, Raymond Roussel, and says this about him: "I sensed a genius, and I was not far from the truth." Intrigued by this judgement, I decided to read *Impressions d'Afrique*; I must one day discuss this work (published by Lemerre) the stunning originality of which can leave no one indifferent.

Raymond Roussel presumably replied with this undated letter, whose envelope is missing:

Saturday.

Dear Sir and *confrère*,
I owe you a double vote of thanks for *La Suisse* and for *Bonsoir*.
How strange and pleasant it is to be read by you, after reading you so much!
Your grateful admirer.

Raymond Roussel.

Or else by means of this calling-card, addressed not to "Willy", but to "Monsieur Henry Gauthier-Villars", Villa des Fleurs, Monaco (postmarked: Paris RP, 7.11.1923):

My dear sir and *confrère*,
Such a judgement coming from You! It is a marvellous dream, and what better recompense for my efforts could I have hoped for?...
With all my gratitude and admiration.

Raymond Roussel.

In his "*À bâtons rompus*" column in *La Suisse*, Willy wrote about the books he was reading. First, on 10 November:

In his highly curious *Pas sur le sable* [or rather, *Les Pas effacés*], Robert de Montesquiou mentions one of his neighbours in Neuilly, Raymond Roussel, to whom we owe the extraordinary *Impressions d'Afrique*. It teems with improbable, and even impossible, events which are explained with such cool ease that the reader rather anxiously feels his reason falter before this deceptive and eloquent author's apparent logic. Standing on the tightrope of paradox, Raymond Roussel juggles impeccably with glittering sophisms.

* Jean Bélias collection.

Then, on 6 December:

For stage managers on the lookout for curious acts, we should recommend the cithara-playing worm which Raymond Roussel mentions in his astounding *Impressions d'Afrique*, luxuriously published by Lemerre.

Above the cithara there is a small trough, pierced at the bottom by a small channel, which is blocked by the worm lying on top. When it rises up, this creature allows drops of water to pass out which skilfully produce various notes as they fall on the cithara's strings. Thanks to its ingeniously rhythmic contortions, the small reptile manages to make the cithara simultaneously play a tune and its accompaniment; violent leaps accentuate the theme, which is then subtly varied by slight quivers of its supple body.

This was, in fact, guaranteed to charm "*L'Ouvreuse du Cirque d'Été*"*, the pen-name under which Willy published his music criticism. Roussel thanked him, evoking another admirer (postcard depicting Titian's *Jupiter and Antiope*, Musée du Louvre; envelope postmarked Paris-XVI, Place Chopin, 20.30, 19.12.1923):

A thousand thanks, dear sir and *confrère*, for your delightful reference to my cithara player. I am pleased that you like this passage; it was one that Edmond Rostand enjoyed.

Your grateful admirer.

Raymond Roussel.

A month later, on 21 January 1924, Willy told a story in his column in *La Suisse* which had presumably been related to him by Raymond Roussel. How? During a visit, or by letter? In the latter case, it is strange that Willy did not keep it:

Monsieur Raymond Roussel, the original and highly erudite author of *Locus Solus*, has communicated to me a letter which the Comte de Montesquiou-Fézensac received [...] from our irascible Sarah, and which no newspaper has ever published:

"My dear Robert, you it was who introduced me to la Duse.† I was extremely polite and patient with her. You are quite aware of all the base attacks and slanders I have suffered since her arrival; as I had had my apotheosis, some wanted to bury me. You also know that I was forced to sue a certain Shurmann [her impresario], who had an odious article about me published in the press. You are quite aware of all the emotional agony I have suffered over the last month! And to top it all, while I behaved in a patient and totally straightforward manner, la Duse decides to give her farewell performance! This Shurmann goes to see that senile old De Sarcey, who declares that my theatre is too small. All of this was shameful, and la Duse's part in it two-faced, oh! terribly two-faced!"

Sarah kept her grudge. A little while after these events, she had to have an operation. Dr Pozzi, who was sitting by her, read out to his patient, while she lay under her bedclothes, the affectionate telegrams which arrived from all sides, and to which she indicated the answers. They came to one from la Duse. From the depths of her bed, the voice of the sick woman growled: "That damned bitch!" "It would be hard for me to send such an appreciation," the surgeon replied, laughing. Then, without transition, Sarah switched back to her suavest tones: "Send her my affectionate kisses."

Thus, by way of Robert de Montesquiou, Roussel and Willy started to correspond. On 7 March, Willy mentioned the "mystical emotion" that Voltaire had experienced before Frederick the Great, as described by Roussel (*Locus Solus*, pp.147-9). This

* I.e. "The Summer Circus Usherette".

† Eleonora Duse, Italian actress, 1859-1924. The "Sarah" here is of course la Bernhardt.

time we shall certainly not be taken in by the authenticity of such an anecdote. Nor was Willy, who added: "I am taking up this page of Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus*, which *Charivari** blames me for admiring. My dear fellow humorist, I am far from showing repentance."

Willy had worked out Roussel's procedure — and done so correctly (other letters show this). It consisted of the very technique of true and approximate puns that serious readers held against Willy himself. Thus, no doubt hoping to give his readers an opening, in 1925 he provided them with the following indication:

Not everyone can chatter away decently about his underclothes. As Raymond Roussel said:

"*Non 'liquette' omnibus...*"

For the author of *Impressions d'Afrique* and *L'Étoile au Front* is seriously funny.†

At about the same time, in 1926, his friend Madeleine de Swarte published *Les Fourberies de Papa*, which was probably written for the most part by the very same Willy who was accused of signing countless novels that had been "ghosted". Thus it is his daughter (for in the novel, she is not one of his mistresses, who used to call him "papa", but a legitimate child) who declares:

What a dangerous education I had!

Fortunately, papa hardly leaves me any time to think. With that unbridled enthusiasm, so spontaneous that I find it almost incredible, he leaps up, brandishing his book like a tragic-actor's sword. Is he about to challenge some Navarrese, Moors and Castilians? No, he announces a French name.

"That Roussel! Ah, that Raymond Roussel!"

"What has he done to you?"

"I am flabbergasted with admiration!"

"...?"

"He's an eccentric, violently controversial author. People throw mud and roses at him. But he leaves no one indifferent. He charmed me with his aggressive originality, his genius for the bizarre and a passion for artificiality that it is hard to analyse."

"Yes, but papa, the same could be said of you."

"Of me? Never! I don't write for myself, but for countless others. First, for my publisher, who pays enough to cover my rent in Paris, my Havana cigars, your Dutch collars and other expenditures in various countries, so long as my novels have 'a happy ending' (like popular films, a condition *ciné qua non*) and, after facing a thousand and one dangers on land and on sea, Anselme finally married Cunegonde. [...] Lucky old Raymond Roussel does not wade about in the mud of such necessities! He composes books without thinking about his bookseller's aesthetics; he has plays performed without begging for the appreciation of that formidable trinity made up of the head of the *claque*, the standing fire-officer and the ticket seller; it is for his own delight, and for a few understanding artists, that, standing on the tightrope of difficulty, he juggles with glittering paradoxes, as poor old Maugis [alias Willy] would say. [...] Like me, he spat on our profession of being a public Writer... Like me, he envied Raymond Roussel for not having to give a damn about that pathetic clientele, which enslaves unfortunate men of letters, and which can only be appealed to by means of vulgarity, grandiloquence, or mawkishness, ever since the day they were given the vote — and taught how to read.

* Theatrical review hostile to Roussel.

† Willy, *Souvenirs littéraires... et autres*, 1925. [Punning on the Latin *non licet omnibus* (Not everyone is allowed to) with French "*non liquette omnibus*" (i.e. "no vests on the bus"). [Trans.]

"I do not mind his exalting the visionary of *Impressions d'Afrique*, but I cannot bear to see him savagely ripping himself to pieces, like a despairing artist, unsatisfied with his work, and searching for perfection... [...] I had to break the evil spell."

Silently I opened the piano... Suddenly calm, papa guesses what I want. He plays a prelude and I at once start dreaming.

His elegant hands trace out the sweet and charming melody of *Locus Solus*, whose dreamy curve has been overladen with a *nouveau-riche* ornamentation that swamps its fragility... Poor little Fantine, you are bent double under your heavy burden, you're fading away...

This passage by a literary mercenary is moving. All the more so, it seems to us, because it is the first time a writer or literary critic shows that he is not jealous of Roussel's wealth, but instead envies his freedom. This was also noted by Jean Cocteau, in *Opium*, 1930: "Roussel's wealth allows him to live alone, without the slightest prostitution". But could Roussel, who wanted only "glory", have understood Willy or Cocteau?

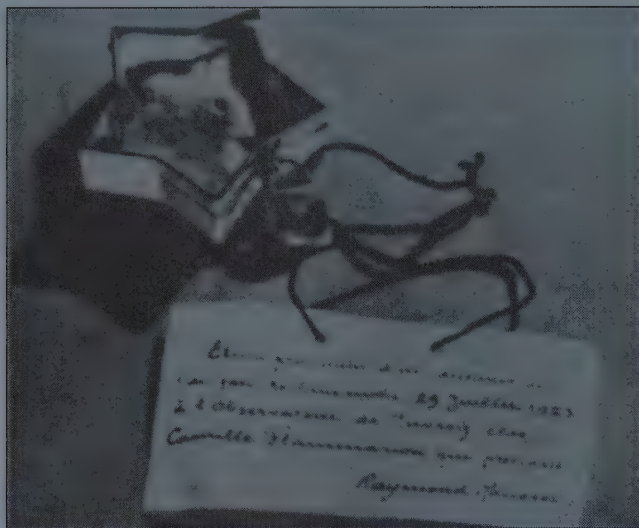
CAMILLE FLAMMARION

But did Roussel not have the "star on the forehead", that mark of his destiny which forced him to undertake such dedicated labour? "Yes, I once felt that I had that star on my forehead, and I shall never forget it," he told Dr Janet. Or "someone who could have led an idle life, gave the world a strange example of assiduous work and virile perseverance", as he wrote in a play that was performed in May 1924, called, of course, *The Star on the Forehead*.

"Thinking that the public's incomprehension perhaps derived from the fact that I had until then presented only adaptations of novels, I decided to write something specifically for the stage."

Only Roussel could have had such an idea!

The two plays which he wrote and had staged, *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*, are also homages to Camille Flammarion. To Roussel's mind, he was a Jules Verne hero, a Canterel whose *Locus Solus* was his observatory in Juvisy. Raymond Roussel had read his works (we know that, before the war, he used to read out loud pages from *Uranie*) and an echo can certainly be heard in the last scene of *La Poussière de Soleils*; but there are also, perhaps, traces of the astronomer's scientific mysticism and parapsychic research still to be discovered in Roussel's writings, despite his materialistic scepticism. What is more, Roussel read scientific works, or at least popularisations, and in particular the magazine *La Nature*. He was interested in algebra and the theory of relativity; and we must certainly attribute not to him, but to Pierre Frondaie, Canterel's scornful opinion of Einstein (second version of Act I of *Locus Solus*): "He's just someone who has given language a different code."



* This biscuit, which is crumbling and broken from top to bottom, appeared as number 375 in the auction of Dora Maar's books (directed by Galantaris). The label was described as "a slip of parchment". Its authenticity has been doubted. Georges Bataille wrote: "The object sold after Roussel's death was found by chance in a flea market. It did not belong to me, but it remained for several months in my drawer, and it moves me to speak of it. Roussel's obscure intentions seem directly linked to the star's edible nature: he apparently wanted to appropriate this star, which could be eaten, more thoroughly and with greater reality than by simply absorbing it. In my opinion, this strange object meant that Roussel had, in his own way, fulfilled the dream he must have had of eating a star in the sky." (*Les Mangeurs d'étoiles*, André Masson, Rouen, 1940). Other objects have been found in flea markets by Pierre Mazars's father and by Jacques Hérold, and books discovered by Lucien Biton in the bins of the Hôtel Drouot.

In Camille Flammarion, Roussel discovered everything he admired and desired: the astronomer had been a Commander of the *Légion d'honneur* since 1922, then been included in the *Album Mariani* (a cocoa-based aperitif) and the Félix Potin Collection (a series of small, give-away photographs, produced by this famous grocer, celebrating politicians, artists and sportsmen). "His philosophical and poetic temperament," wrote the biographer of the *Album Mariani*, "means that he enjoys the company of artists and writers. Accordingly, with the help of a charming mistress of the house, whose gracious looks are reminiscent of the last century's elegance, he receives besides scientists the likes of Janssen, Faye, Colonel Laussédats and Prince Roland Bonaparte, men such as Legouvé, Daudet, Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Gailhard, Colonne, Carolus Duran, Anatole France, and many others." And among them, Raymond Roussel, who brought back as a prize a biscuit shaped like a five-pointed star, which he had enclosed in a small glass-lidded box of the same shape, locked by a tiny silver clasp. A parchment label in Roussel's hand is attached:

A star from a lunch which I had on Sunday 29 July 1923 at the observatory of Juvisy at the home of Camille Flammarion, who presided.

Raymond Roussel.*

At the meeting of the Société astronomique de France of 7 November 1923, Raymond Roussel's application for membership was presented by M. and Mme Camille Flammarion in person. He was accepted as a member at the next meeting, on 12 December, and informed by letter on the 15th of his status as a "founder member", which of course implied a greater financial contribution than for a normal member. A radiant star figures at the bottom of the diploma he was given.

On a copy of *Impressions d'Afrique* he wrote:

It is in the throes of enthusiastic exultation, brought on by reading that incomparable book *Le Monde avant la création de l'homme*, that I am writing this dedication to that genius Camille Flammarion.

And Camille Flammarion sent him a photo:

To Raymond Roussel, the delightful poet, kind recollections from an astronomer.

Flammarion.

When inscribing a copy of *Locus Solus* on Japanese vellum to Mme. Flammarion (Camille Flammarion had died on 4 June 1925), Roussel claimed to be an eternal “Flammarion-worshipper”.

L'ÉTOILE AU FRONT

In order to write *L'Étoile au Front*, Roussel once again broke off the composition of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. It was the first time that he had written for the stage, but this does not seem to have given him any qualms. The most important lesson he had learnt from working with Pierre Frondaie was that a good plot was vital: hence the courtroom scene and the acquittal of an innocent man, which preceded the visit to *Locus Solus*. For *L'Étoile au Front*, Roussel began with a plot reminiscent of Paul d'Ivoi or Jules Verne, but no sooner is it introduced, than it is forgotten! At least, so it seems to the spectator, who must wait until the end of the last act, and the explanation of Boissenin's concept of the “star on the forehead”, in order to hear a distant echo of the twin Indian girls at the beginning who also bore the same sign on their foreheads! (Berthe d'Yd, who played the role of one of the twins, remembered the *tika* she wore.)

In this way Roussel considered that he had “rounded off” *L'Étoile au Front* and at the same time explained the title.

In *Le Journal des Débats* of 8 February 1926, Henry Bidou summed it up in the following terms:

All the stories invented by M. Roussel begin and end with some, apparently commonplace, object which becomes a collector's item. [...] The play simply describes these items and their origins. It was a Decameron rather than a theatrical work.*

It had taken the critics just two years to forget the “plot” of the twin Indian girls.†

In contrast to what occupied the stage in the preceding two dramatisations, the objects in *L'Étoile au Front* are decidedly unspectacular. No more rails of veal lights, earthworms playing citharas, Danton's head or diamonds of *aqua micans*. What we have are simply manuscripts, books, jewels and stuffed animals. There would in fact be nothing strange or astonishing about these items — which were not “created” by the procedure, but instead stand as pretexts for tales that derived from the procedure — were it not for the fact that they are “fetishes” laden with meaning and resonances which the characters, one after another, reveal before our eyes. What about a bouquet of flowers? Or a piece from a star-shaped biscuit? They narrate *Le Mariage de Loti* and *Uranie*. “Raymond Roussel had the capability of twenty novelists and the material for a hundred novels.”‡

* “I will always remember the supper at which Henry Bidou recited to us by heart certain passages by Raymond Roussel.” Jane Faure-Lucas, in the “booklet of quotations” of 1925.

† There seems to be no doubt that these “jumelles” are “jumelles Flammarion”. Indeed they are *jumelles* (twin girls) *à étoiles* (with stars on their foreheads), or *jumelles* (opera-glasses) *à étoiles* (star actresses), or even *jumelles* (binoculars) *à étoiles* (for star-gazing), that is to say “Flammarion binoculars” the different models of which were described by advertisements in the press as being suitable for “soldiers, sailors, theatre-goers, race-goers, etc.”.

‡ Fernand Gregh, report on *L'Étoile au Front* (in the “booklet of quotations” of 1925).

Another difference compared with the previous plays is that its staging was low key. Pierre Leiris had probably advised caution, and it is true that two months earlier, in March 1924, the franc had collapsed. Since August 1914, the cost of living had quintupled. This financial catastrophe had been enough to diminish many pre-war fortunes.

In order to stage *L'Étoile au Front*, the Théâtre du Vaudeville, directed by Victor Silvestre, allowed Roussel to use for his matinées the sitting-room set for *Après l'amour*, by Pierre Wolff and Henri Duvernois, which was being performed in the evening: a bourgeois interior, Louis XV-style furniture, rugs, a crystal chandelier and French windows upstage. A set for another scene had already been used in a play called *L'Enfant roi*. Thus there was no cost for the sets, and no music, ballets or costume designer mentioned on the posters. On 7 May, *Comœdia* reported that "Denise Keene is beautifully dressed by Martial and Armand, while Yonnel's extreme elegance is thanks to O'Rossen. Callamand is also very smart in his suits, tailored to perfection by Peck and Martin". The performances were reduced to a minimum: three matinées at 2.30 (or 1.30, reports vary) on Monday 5, Tuesday 6 and Wednesday 7 1924. The actors were cast by Callamand:

<i>Trézel</i>	MM.	Candé
<i>Claude</i>		Yonnel
<i>Joussac</i>		Joffre
<i>Gaston</i>		Puylagarde
<i>Cahoud</i>		Callamand
<i>Lissandreau</i>		Jean d'Yd
<i>Geneviève</i>	Mmes	Denise Keene
<i>Mme Joussac</i>		Grumbach
<i>Meljah</i>		Cécile Guyon
<i>Élise</i>		Calvé
<i>Zéoug and Leidjé</i>		Berthe d'Yd, Fresnel

"An honourable production," *Comœdia* commented on 7 May.

L'Étoile au Front, a play in three acts, was by invitation only. Roussel had already busied himself with "composing his audience". As early as 19 April, he wrote to Jacques Doucet (letter postmarked: Gare de l'Est):

Dear Sir,
 I am deeply touched by your flattering request, and should be delighted to invite you to the full dress-rehearsal of *L'Étoile au Front*.
 Yours faithfully,
 Raymond Roussel.*

He then replied as follows to a further request from Jacques Doucet (no postmark, delivered by hand):

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet.

Friday.

A thousand thanks for your charming letter, my dear Sir. I am so sorry that I cannot give you a second seat next to the first. Alas! The theatre is already full.

With my friendship and thanks.

Raymond Roussel.*

Raymond Roussel must also have received many other requests, if we may judge by the following extremely late one from Cadet de Gassicourt, a descendant of a well-known family of literary doctors and pharmacists, and one of the main members of the Société du roman philosophique, which Maurice Heine had set up in order to publish the works of Sade. At the time, he was working at the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he was responsible for issuing entry cards. The letter is on BN-headed notepaper:

Dare I recommend myself for the way in which I welcomed you on 10 January, when you introduced yourself at the Bibliothèque Nationale with a letter of recommendation from your publisher Monsieur Lemerre in order to make a request of our services?

According to the newspapers, it would seem that a new play of yours will shortly be performed. You know how interested I was in your novels *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, and how much I regretted not having seen either of the stage adaptations of these novels. That is why I am asking you if you could possibly reserve two seats for me at the dress rehearsal, which will, I assure you, be occupied by confirmed Rousselians.

Recommendation of my person may also be had from Dr Gagey, with whom I have often discussed you.

Thank you in advance, dear Sir.

Yours faithfully.

A "preview" (which seems to have been written, or dictated, by Roussel) appeared in the press on 4 May:

L'Étoile au Front at the Vaudeville

A new play by Raymond Roussel! It comes with the promise of another battle between the "avant-garde", which sings the praises of the author of *Locus Solus*, and the traditionalists who are still ruffled by such asperities.

Among the young generation are many fanatics who see in him an innovator who will greatly influence the future.

"A strange, new and complete author," is how Edmond Jaloux described him, and reading some of his work caused Willy to exclaim: "Some of his work flabbergasts me with admiration!"

What will *L'Étoile au Front* be? Will it be reminiscent of *Impressions d'Afrique*, about which Robert de Montesquiou wrote so many enthusiastic pages, and from which Jacques-Émile Blanche, in one of his recent articles, cited the Fogar passage read to him by André Gide?

Will *L'Étoile au Front* be reminiscent of *Locus Solus*, that novel which Léon Treich described as "an entire universe" and which included Henry Bidou among its admirers; that novel which Paul Reboux called "literarily extraordinary"; that work which is so seductive that André Rivoire, after reading it in a single night, declared: "Despite what has been said, once one has begun it, one reads it through to the end"?

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. A third letter to Jacques Doucet (date unknown — it was delivered by hand) tells us that, on this occasion or on another, Roussel was replying to an invitation from him:

Wednesday.

Sir,

I should be delighted to call on you as you have been kind enough to suggest. Would the end of the afternoon suit you? If so, for next week I can suggest Monday, Wednesday or Saturday from six o'clock.

Yours faithfully,

Raymond Roussel.

Whatever the truth, if there is a conflict between Rousselians and anti-Rousselians, the actors will surely attract universal praise. [...] With such an élite assembly, what does tomorrow hold for us?

In *Le Temps* of 12 May, André Rivoire wondered if:

... when letting his theatre to the author of *L'Étoile au Front*, the director of the Vaudeville realised the problems that could result and the ill-effects on the play currently being performed? Many people might think that the run of *Après l'amour* was over. A dress rehearsal cannot be announced with impunity; the cast of a new play cannot be published, especially when it includes members of the regular troupe, without giving the impression that things are going badly. [...] It is true that the three matinée performances of *L'Étoile au Front* did not interrupt the play by MM. Pierre Wolff and Henri Duvernois, but they must surely have caused some fall in box-office takings, and the two playwrights risked becoming the victims of an amateur.

Before André Rivoire's article, however, the theatre management had published the following press release on 5 May:

Monsieur Victor Silvestre has asked us to make a clarification and confirm that "the performances of *Après l'amour*, by Pierre Wolff and Henri Duvernois and featuring Lucien Guitry, the one-hundredth performance of which will be celebrated on the 16th of this month, are far from over.

"*L'Étoile au Front*, by Raymond Roussel, will be given just three matinée performances, by invitation only, today, tomorrow and Wednesday at 1.30."

The next day, 6 May, there was another press release, this time from the two playwrights. Meanwhile, according to Roger Vitrac, Raymond Roussel was concerned to know if two hundred small benches had been put in the Vaudeville's balcony, as he had requested. (But we should not always believe Vitrac, whose memory played tricks on him: he mentions the "first evenings" of a play that was performed just three times, and in the afternoon!)

"Another tumult, another battle," wrote Roussel, "but this time my supporters were far more numerous." For the critics paid little attention to *L'Étoile au Front*. The three matinées were simply an opportunity for gossip columnists to dig for scandal.

Roussel filled up his theatre in a strange way. In what was clearly a reply to their "Protestation" of December 1922, he "intended to inform the Association générale des étudiants that two hundred seats had been reserved for any students who desired to applaud his play at the Vaudeville".

Quite a lot of them came, and heckled the three acts of Monsieur Roussel's play.

One spectator in the balcony tried to stand up to them and, after the performance, he argued with one of them in the corridor.

This young student, who certainly did not lack nerve, defended himself against a group of the author's supporters, while his comrades complained loudly about the eighteen-*sou* bus fare they had spent in order to see *L'Étoile au Front*. One of them even claimed that it was not an *étoile* on the forehead, but a *toile*, or spider's web! (Column of 9 May 1924)

Then the hundred-odd students, whom some joker had invited, left the Vaudeville in a riotous mood, as though it were rag week, thrilled at such a "free for all". (*L'Éclair*, 5 May)

"I heard," wrote Roussel, "that after the performance of one of my plays, a group of students waited for some time, with the intention of booing me when I emerged."

The first act raised only a few murmurs and a few laughs. People were still hoping that the action would begin. (*Aux Écoutes*, 11 May)

In the middle of the first act, a voice was heard from the balcony: "I don't understand."

A gentleman then replied from the orchestra stalls: "Get an interpreter."

The same scene recurred several times: "I don't understand", the man in the balcony said, in an increasingly gloomy tone. "Get an interpreter," the man in the orchestra stalls insisted with a voice like a megaphone. (Youki Desnos)

In the second act, MM. Gabriel Boissy and Paul Grégorio began to complain. M. Grégorio cried out: "What about the twins? I want to see the twins! Get the twins on stage!"

Thus encouraged, another voice cried: "And what about the monkey?"

"Come now," M. Paul Lombard remarked dryly. "You know perfectly well that the author appears only at the end!"

"I'm p...ing off," Paul Grégorio declared. "And if you don't do the same, then you're a bunch of idiots." (*Aux Écoutes*, 11 May)

In his posthumous book, Roussel wrote:

"During the second act, when one of my adversaries cried out to those who were applauding: 'Keep at it, you *claqué!*', Robert Desnos replied: '*Nous sommes la claqué et vous êtes la joue.*'* This witticism met with some success and was cited in various newspapers [in particular by Léo Marchès, *Aux Écoutes*, *Lc Cri de Paris*, etc.]."

One lady declared: "In fact, Roussel has calmed down and, if it had been written by another author, we would have found it enjoyable."

M. Roussel was delighted. He was grinning broadly and saying: "Yes, yes... all's well... I'm happy." And then modestly he added: "But the only problem is Act III is still to come..."

During Act III, all hell broke loose. M. Boissy yelled: "We are being taken for idiots!"

A young agitator of a Dadaist persuasion was pitting himself against those in the front stalls.

An obese man, in the first row of the balcony, was at the same time defending the author.

Armed forces became involved. But the stripling refused to let them throw him out: "Let me stay in the theatre," he cried. "I alone am defending the author!" (*Aux Écoutes*, 11 May. The same incident was reported by J. B.-O. in *Lc Gaulois* of 7 May: "A municipal policeman entered and, collaring the spectator, tried to expel him because he was disturbing the performance. When he finally made himself heard, he said: 'I am not disturbing the performance at all, and I

* See note to p.91, above.

am even one of the only ones clapping... I'm a friend of the author's.")

Despite what some people might think, those few fanatics, Monsieur Roussel's enthusiastic admirers — they may even have been "initiates" — who shouted at the grumbling crowd "If you don't like it, then go!" were not completely wrong. (Marc Brésil, *L'Éclair*, 7 May)

The murmur rapidly became a clamour. And the clamour a storm. Everywhere, in the stalls, the boxes and balcony, Monsieur Roussel's little comrades, all of them young [Michel Leiris was twenty-four, Robert Desnos twenty-five] and all of them capable of making the new generation ridiculous thanks to their idiotic pride, screamed out incredible battle-cries. The grumblers answered back. A little old man next to me, like a bird in a hen-house, was standing up on the tips of his polished boots and, each time Yonnel finished a story, he yelped in a shrill voice: "Encore! Encore!"

A little farther away, an almost-enraged spectator had formed his black hands into a megaphone and was roaring like a madman: "The bill! The bill!" His hair was standing on end.

They threw coins at good old Mme Grumbach. And Mme Grumbach admonished the crowd. She looked like a child whose candy had been stolen. What painful memories! [...] In Act III, a rumpus started in the stalls. A young loon was spitting insults into M. Émile Mas's face! Dominating the storm, Paul Lombard demanded with great majesty that the guilty parties should be punished; women fainted and the police had to intervene.

An anti-Rousselian groaned:

"I'm getting out of here!"

A Rousselian replied:

"And I'm getting a hundred francs!" (Jean Botrot, "*Journal d'un convalescent*", *Comœdia*, 7 May)

Nevertheless, a few lines were rather successful. People burst out laughing when, on leaving the stage, Joffre declared: "But time presses." Two clans soon revealed their presence in the theatre: those that had come "for a giggle" and those who wanted to listen to every word, while others still drowned out the actors' voices with assorted cries. One spectator suddenly stood up and insulted the entire crowd. Amid the dark clothes of civilians could be seen the colours of a municipal guard. The curtain came down and was raised again. M. Candé's speech and M. Joffre's "*ailes-de-pigeon*" received applause. (*L'Éclair*, 5 May)

M. Candé was furious. Unsuccessfully he tried to intimidate the audience. Mme Grumbach did no better. M. Yonnel stopped being serious and laughed. M. Puylagarde went on conscientiously acting. As for Joffre, he was in a good mood and, smiling, performed his *entrechats*, pirouettes and "*ailes-de-pigeon*" with unexpected grace. (*Aux Écoutes*, 11 May)

What did Raymond Roussel think? We might think that he suffered. Not at all. When the play was published, he dedicated a copy on Japanese vellum "to Monsieur Joffre, the incomparable creator of the part of Joussac who, at the première of *L'Étoile au Front*, so masterfully mocked the audience with his famous 'lone horseman', from the grateful author."

Contrary to general opinion, the women were just as shrill as the men. Three times there was calm, and three times the "row" started up again. The curtain was dropped in the middle of the act, then, when everyone had calmed down, the play resumed.

Half an hour after the performance, there were still spectators arguing in front of the

Vaudeville. One gentleman had attracted a crowd: "Yes, here's someone who thinks he understands the play... So he's explaining it!" (*Aux Écoutes*, 11 May)

Desnos's recollections, as reported by Youki, are particularly pungent:

After a certain amount of time, the atmosphere grew stormy. People were whistling from the balcony.

Desnos stood up: "Shut up, you f...ing idiots!"

The fashionable ladies, who had been invited by Raymond Roussel, were as put out by the play as by the attitude of the public.

"Oh! How rude! What a ruffian! How awful!"

The hecklers were more direct: "F...ing idiot yourself!"

"Come here and say that!"

"Wait there and we will!"

"Come on then!"

While the actors waited patiently on stage, a din of clattering feet was heard. It came from the spectators in the balcony and the top gallery who were making a bee-line for Desnos. The Surrealists started yelling and the ladies were frightened to death.

A little old man in a suit, with the badge of the *Légion d'honneur*, said to Robert: "Stand beside me, young fellow."

Robert clambered over three rows in the stalls, stood beside the frail old man, who grabbed him by his jacket collar, sat him down forcefully, protected him with his slender frame, and then declared: "Now let them come!"

There then followed a rugby scrum. Thérèse, extremely worried, was looking for Robert while herself handing out punches, since she had been a gym instructor at Hébert's.

Robert had thrown himself on the floor and, on his hands and knees, managed to leave the theatre by crawling between the combatants' legs. Thérèse followed him. Once outside, they stationed themselves on the pavement opposite the theatre and waited for it all to finish. The fire curtain had been dropped, the police summoned and the theatre evacuated.

A woman in an evening dress rushed over to Robert yelling: "There he is! There's that guttersnipe. I recognise him!" and slapped him.

Robert wisely did not respond in front of the crowd, so Thérèse Treize took up the cudgels: "I'll return that instead of him, Madame, for he won't do it himself!" The police arrested a few people at random, then the crowd split up.

André Breton admitted that he and his friends had not really understood the play. However, it was not a taste for scandal for scandal's sake that had attracted the Surrealists to the Vaudeville and made them stand up against a hostile audience: "I was there myself, and cannot claim that the enthusiastic support that I gave the play was based on an immediate, and sufficiently solid, comprehension of the text. But most of my friends and I had read (and re-read) *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, which was enough to make us trust the author" (*Fronton-Virage*). In 1922, when drawing up Jacques Doucet's "Bibliothèque idéal", Breton had already stopped referring to Roussel with reverence, as he had done the year before. Much later, in 1948, he confessed in a letter to Jean Ferry: "Without you, I would probably still not see anything in him."

Raymond Roussel's family was also in the audience. Michel Ney, his nephew, did not stay until the end; but Roussel inscribed to him a copy on Japanese vellum of *L'Étoile au Front*, with an allusion to a poem Michel had sent him:

to the author of the verses with words in *-ence*, with tender recollections from your uncle and *confrère*.

Germaine, the Duchesse d'Elchingen, came with her cousin Philippe Grimprel, his wife and their daughter Nicole. She "did not approve" of her brother, admitting that she was bored and understood nothing of the text the actors were reciting. But, when it came to the scandal, she thought of him at once: "Just think, he's there, behind us... How he must be suffering!"

In fact, once again, Raymond Roussel did not understand what had happened. "In the third act, there was such a disturbance that the curtain had to be dropped in the middle of a scene, and raised again after a little while," he wrote in his posthumous book. Furthermore, a journalist who signed himself A.S., and called his column "A Fine Joke" (7 May) wrote: "The audience made animal calls, whistled, clapped and stamped their feet. Meanwhile, a smilingly impassive M. Roussel smoked a cigar [he did not in fact smoke...]. 'They're all mad,' he declared. 'They're poor madmen.'"

His "booklet of quotations" from 1932 finishes with: "You think yourselves clever, but you're idiots", together with this note of its origin: "Remark made by one of Raymond Roussel's supporters to a group of hecklers during a performance of *L'Étoile au Front*."

The scandal was not limited to the first night. In *Paris-Midi* of 8 May, Jacques Florange wrote a column entitled "The Spider on the Forehead" (and not "under the forehead" as it appears in *How I Wrote...*):

I had been told: "Go along, it's hilarious. The play's incoherence is utterly comic... There's a terrible uproar in the audience."

Yesterday afternoon I attended the second performance of Raymond Roussel's *L'Étoile au Front* and the opinion I had been given was fully confirmed. It is indeed hilarious and extremely sad. I had seen *Locus Solus*, *Impressions d'Afrique* and a few other examples of Raymond Roussel's gibberish [which ones, we might ask?], but never before perhaps has the author's range of nonsense been extended so far... He's a virtuoso. The whistling from the audience, the boos, the uproar and the protestations were a whole orchestra that accompanied the play for a while. At the Vaudeville it was as if we were at the Grand Opera-House in Berlin at a performance of Wagner.

Roussel could only have found the concluding comparison flattering! But the scandal did not stop there: "Some journalists interviewed my actors to know if I wrote my plays seriously, or if my aim was to make fun of people."

It was Antoine — who had presumably not forgiven Roussel for having his

previous plays performed at the theatre that bore his name — who was the first to make a scandal of the money angle, when he published an article entitled “Too Much Patience” in *Le Journal* of 7 May:

The day before yesterday, we attended a matinée in one of Paris's great theatres, with a little scandal that deserves noting. [...]

An amateur author with money entrusts it to the first organisers he can find all the more readily when he is given the illusion that the press will be present and his work will be talked about as though it were a normal play. Even if it has only two or three more-or-less private performances, and the public is thus excluded. Then one is invited to a show of little quality, almost always useless, because a gentleman has the means to finance his petty concerns. This is an increasingly common abuse of our good will and patience.

As for me, I shall not discuss the play in question, and all of us should do likewise; silence is the only way to fight against such a habit which merely worsens the confusion in which our theatre now struggles.

On 10 May, Fernand Gregh began by commiserating with the actors:

It is a shame to see M. Candé panting after his text; his fine features, with those velvet eyebrows, were involuntarily aghast at what he had to say.* M. Yonnel, elegant, reserved and aloof, sniggered inwardly and sometimes outwardly, despite himself. As for M. Joffre, he was like a *witness*, a *point of reference*, a real character placed there to allow us to measure the extent of such vain nonsense, an earthling amid lunatics. Yes, it was the moon that shone down on that play.

But it quickly becomes apparent what was really irritating the critics. For example, Jacques Florange in *Paris-Midi* of 8 May:

Yesterday's matinée would have been a good one, if I had not felt distinctly ill at ease at the sight of artists such as Joffre, Candé, Yonnel and Mme Grumbach prostituting their talents for a few thousand francs. The honour of the profession should not be lowered for the sake of money, especially when one calls oneself an Artiste.

The previous day, Jean Botrot had already started doing the accounts:

A few artistes agreed to act in this play. People swear that each of them receives two thousand francs per evening.

What a gift from the gods! In the middle of the first page of *Comœdia* of 8 May, under the headline “Delicate Problems” and with a complete lack of delicacy, Paul Nivoix began a survey which continued the next day and was to finish on 12 May: “Does an artist have the duty to refuse certain roles?”

We should first point out that there was nothing new about this sort of investigation in *Comœdia*. The pages of the magazine had to be filled up, and in fact a few days before it had wondered: “Does an author have the right to choose his actors?”

* This was not Raymond Roussel's opinion, when he dedicated a copy of *L'Étoile au Front* on Japanese vellum to him: “to Monsieur Candé who so magnificently imposed the character of Trézel on a crazed audience. His grateful admirer.”

“Right”, “duty”... these two words were being used with all their power to provoke.

The replies received (herein reordered) may seem a little long, but it is useful today to see just how much Roussel’s work was, despite himself, scandalous in an exemplary fashion. (The headings are by Paul Nivoix.)

The introduction puts the questions clearly:

Mme Grumbach, when shouting over the tumult that had interrupted the performance of Act III of a new play, spoke to the guests and manifested her unhappiness in the following way:

“We are doing an honest *job*.”

This comment caused various reactions and, after the rather lively ripostes it received, gave way to a discussion of the value of the word “job”. “Job” or “art”? And, in fact, what are the moral constraints actors should respect? How far can they go when accepting work? [...] Are actors responsible for their work? Should they use their critical judgement concerning any part that is offered them and refuse to participate if they realise the play is not performable? Such were the questions we discussed during the intervals and after leaving.

To begin with, here are the opinions of the play’s opening cast:

M. YONNEL APPEALS TO PRECEDENCE

Why should I refuse a role when an author has spontaneously contacted me and declared: “I am going to present a work in which I consider your contribution to be absolutely essential, no matter what the price”?

Firstly, who can guarantee that, in a few years’ time, this play, which has been so severely criticised today, will not be considered a masterpiece? Have we not seen a similar thing happen with *Ubu Roi*?

How can one ask an actor to judge the role on offer and turn it down if the author’s literary bent does not match his own conception of the theatre? In such conditions, should we not then also refuse to act in plays where ideas with which we disagree are exposed?

Why should I, personally, have refused this offer when M. Signoret acted in *Locus Solus* last year, when a play by the same writer, *Impressions d’Afrique*, starred M. Dorival, which has not prevented that excellent actor from today being a member of the Comédie Française, and when, finally, MM. de Max, Max Dearly, Armand Bour, Georges Wague and others acted in very similar circumstances in *Antoine et Cléopâtre* at the Opéra, alongside Mme Rubinstein?

Finally, why should I refuse a role when I know that the director has hired out his theatre, and that the critics are going to attend the dress rehearsal?

M. CALLAMAND CONSIDERS CERTAIN VAUDEVILLES

I have been told: “You have dishonoured yourself by agreeing to act in such a play.” I disagree. The play in question has perfect literary standing. The text is so dense that we had to spend a month learning it, for no approximations are possible. It is thus only fair that the author paid us well. I personally was in charge of casting *L’Étoile au Front*. I received a large number of letters from actors who greatly desired to obtain a part. Those who were not accepted were probably the first to stir up a scandal.

There is no scandal. The author has his own conception of the theatre. In the last three years, he has paid several hundred thousands of francs to actors, designers, stage-hands, etc. I think this is better than throwing it away in Deauville or Monte Carlo.

Finally, since “dishonour” has been mentioned, I can attest that when acting in this play,

written in impeccable French and free of any vulgarity, an actor feels far less embarrassed than when performing in some sub-standard vaudeville, such as those that are shown in the provinces and the outskirts of Paris.

M. CANDÉ RECKONS THOSE WHO DON'T LIKE IT SHOULD LEAVE

When a work harms nobody, when it does not attack someone, when it does not wallow in vulgarity, I do not see why an artist should refuse the opportunity to be paid a good fee, especially given that the performances were private. An audience that has not paid to attend the performance should complain only by leaving the theatre, if it considers that what is on show is of no interest.

M. JOFFRE MAKES DISTINCTIONS

There are two categories of artist: those who have grown rich thanks to their talents, and the others. The former must of course select the plays in which they act, while the latter must above all earn a living. And, when it comes to earning a crust, I think that no criticism is possible.

What is more, it is very difficult to know in advance how a play will be received. Authors, directors and critics are all incapable of foreseeing this. Why should we be the best prophets?

A LETTER FROM MME GRUMBACH

[in reply to Mmes Régina Camier and Véra Sergine]

My rule of conduct has always been "work and silence"; but, since I have been accused by your article of this morning, I should like to reply to my two delightfully indignant fellow actresses.

I congratulate them for being artistes interested only in "great art", but some of us, who started out with the same ideal, now have to be content with just doing an honest job. I reaffirm thAT expression and do not blush in so doing. But there has been talk of dignity, what a grand word! Their dignity perhaps should have consisted in remaining silent.

And here, in extremely abbreviated form, are the opinions of actors who were not taken on by Callamand:

M. HUGUENET REPLIES "YES"

[to the question: "Does AN artist have the duty...?"]

I would prefer to eat bread and cheese rather than agree to act in a play which simply tries the audience's patience. [...] I think that the Union des artistes should take measures to stop similar events from happening again.

M. ARQUILLIÈRE IS NEUTRAL

When performances take place on the margins of daily theatrical life, when they do not occupy a stage to the detriment of other actors and do not expose a paying audience to deception, I do not think much harm has been done.

As for the Union des artistes, it should not intervene. If we receive a complaint [...], it will probably not lead anywhere, since the performances were private.

M. VICTOR BOUCHER THINKS HE WOULD REFUSE IF...

On a bill, the names of certain actors are a form of guarantee and I think we should not disappoint the public that generously encourages us.

M. RAIMU ACCUSES

First and foremost there are theatre directors who should not agree to hire out their stages to have nonsense performed on them.

M. KOVAL IS CATEGORICAL

There are things an actor should not do, if only not to degrade himself.

We are at the service of an art and we must respect it. I of course understand the needy who must above all earn a living and cannot turn down a good fee.

M. PAULEY WILL NEVER BE "THE ELEPHANT'S FOOT"

When I enter on stage, I am no longer Pauley, I am the character desired by the author. It seems to me indispensable that the player be in complete agreement with the playwright's ideas. Without this sincerity, our profession loses its point.

Now, never, when entering on stage, could I convince myself that I was *the elephant's foot* or that *I was running on rails of veal lights!*

That is why, no matter how high the fee, I would refuse to act in plays that I do not understand.

MME RÉGINA CAMIER

I came out feeling infinitely sad, devastated at seeing fine fellow artistes, whose talent I admire, involved in this sad undertaking.

MLLE BLANCHE MONTEL

Finally, we asked the same question of Mlle Blanche Montel, who we knew had refused a part in the play in question.

After refusing to reply, our charming artiste told us:

"I am extremely young in the profession. All I can say is that I was delighted to be able to act in two beautiful roles. So I would not agree to act in a play which I felt sure would displease the public."

MME VÉRA SERGINE HAS THE OPPOSITE OPINION

[to those of Yonnel, Callamand, Candé and Joffré]

M. Roussel asked me to take a part in *L'Étoile au Front*. I read his manuscript. I declined.

Actors must above all respect their art. When they have a clear idea that the play they are being asked to perform in is indefensible, they must turn down the offer, even if the fee is magnificent. It is a question of dignity.

Well, Véra Sergine should have held her tongue! A column on 9 May summed up the actors' answers:

They are unanimously in favour of accepting any role. In 1924, artistic conscience is subordinate to the fee. We rather thought so. Cutlets and limousines come first.

Only Mmes Véra Sergine and Régina Camier declared that actors must first and foremost respect their art and be able to resist the rustling of bank-notes. As for the male actors questioned by our colleague Paul Nivoix, all of them want to earn money. Two women are above such considerations.

There is something new under the sun after all.

And, in *Aux Écoutes* of 18 May, under the title "The Roussel Scandal":

Among the indignant, Mme Véra Sergine was particularly severe. We should like to point out to the Union des artistes that Mme Sergine, who owns a car, a sumptuous apartment on the Trocadéro and a collection of Renoirs valued at several hundred thousand francs, could

provide an example of impartiality by putting on plays of an artistic interest.

The critics, such as R. de Givrey, Pierre Brisson, Nozière and André Rivoire, of course gave their opinions too. They are of little interest today — apart from that of Antoine who, having started the whole scandal, then retracted his views and took up the defence of the actors under the title “Facile Severity”, in *Le Journal* of 11 May:

Some people want to hold the actors partially responsible for the bad joke of which we were the victims at the Vaudeville the other day. When asked about the right of the artist to refuse to participate in peculiar or risky works, several actors replied according to their characters or, rather, their wealth. Huguenet, Mme Sergine and other stars were rather severe to their fellows. That is easy when one has one's car at the stage door and it has been paid for. I saw one of M. Roussel's actors, who, despite a proven talent, was without employment and in the greatest difficulty at the beginning of the season. It is thus improbable that he, or his comrades, accepted such a chore just for pleasure. They all performed it honestly, as they had undertaken so to do; one could only blame them if they had not done so.

What Arquillière, Candé and Joffre said is common sense and, if someone really must be accused, then why not the director who runs one of our most important literary theatres, and who allowed such an unworthy work to be produced there? No doubt, he could have refused these pieces of silver, but the actors whose lives are increasingly difficult are more to be pitied than blamed.

The next day, on 12 May, Antoine returned to the subject:

On several other occasions [this author] has made us waste our time and, once again, we would have done better to have left this eccentric to his favourite pastime. [...] I do not think that the author will be able to repeat such an exploit for some time and, as for me, I shall not fall for it again.

Antoine, of course, did not keep his promise.

“Once again,” Roussel wrote, “the critics mauled me and, as ever, there was talk of madness and mystification.”

It was indeed these very words that were favoured by the columnists. The writer of the “*Quinzaine théâtrale*” column in *Le Théâtre et Comœdia illustré* even noted (1 June 1924): “In his preceding ‘works’, M. Raymond Roussel at least showed signs of a certain Bedlam-like fancy. This time, his madness has worsened: he has become reasonable.”

Such a verdict is hardly adequate. Certain critics had understood nothing, but remained on their guard. For example, Jane Catulle-Mendès: “At the end, we almost understood M. Raymond Roussel's intentions. [...] I *think* that he wanted to reel off a list of all the people in the world who, in the past, were predestined and born with “a star on the forehead”, whether for success, or sufferance”. Charles Morisse wrote in *Bonsoir*: “He has calmed down, his talent has matured and the craziness of his youth has been replaced by a quieter and more profound conception of life. I prefer this

second approach [...]. His stories are curious, and generally moral.” Georges Le Cardonnel (11 May) was extremely impressed by the richness of *L'Étoile au Front* and wondered if: “This play, such as it is, could in fact be a way of satirising certain literary procedures. But I am not really sure if that was M. Roussel’s intention.”

In a long article published in the *Nouvelles littéraires* of 10 May, which Roussel would later use in his “booklet of quotations”, Fernand Gregh wrote words of great import: “However odd it may seem, M. Roussel possesses a sort of genius for the absurd which, when channelled, exploited and matured, could yet produce a truly literary work. His very style occasionally sets off a note of fullness, due to the — pointless — richness of his vocabulary.”

Lugné-Poe remained the most faithful and, on 7 May, wrote:

Raymond Roussel has had *L'Étoile au Front* performed as a matinée at the Vaudeville. Say what you like, but Raymond Roussel could have taken the evening performance. Plays of a far more feeble inventiveness are often produced at the Vaudeville. Raymond Roussel leaves nobody indifferent, as so many others do.

Because of the direction that he wishes his work to take, Raymond Roussel has given no dramatic action to his tales, as is currently fashionable; he wanted the actors to submit to his work, or else not perform at all.

Does he scorn the public, critics and actors? I do not know. But it is my opinion that Raymond Roussel has a densely-packed, original intelligence, and that he is someone whom we are incapable of judging.

Roussel thanked him with an inscribed copy of *L'Étoile au Front* on Japanese vellum:

to Lugné-Poe, a friendly token of gratitude for his magnificent reaction to my adversaries.
April 1925.*

In the end, Roussel, who was sometimes so naïvely confident, could take heart once again. The young Surrealists supported him enthusiastically and some critics had started to follow his work with a commendable interest. The words “madness” and “mystification” do reappear, but also, though less frequently, the word “genius”. In 1924, he must have been more aware of such a reception than he was many years later when writing his posthumous work. Such confidence is confirmed by a column published in *Aux Écoutes* on 18 May:

The failure of *L'Étoile au Front* has not discouraged M. Roussel.

“I shall have my revenge,” he declared.

He is at present looking for a site in Paris where he can build a theatre.

* *Bibliothèque d'un amateur: sur-réalisme, livres et documents*, C. Galantaris, Thierry Bodin, Nouveau Drouot, 23-24 March 1981.

From 12 to 22 May, Roussel published in *Comœdia* Acts II and III of *L'Étoile au Front*. To begin with, according to the introduction to the first instalment, only Act

II was to appear: "This play by M. Roussel, which has just been performed at the Vaudeville, has been the subject of great controversy. Reading this 'modern' work will, without a doubt, allow a judgement to be made. So, in utter impartiality, we offer our readers Act II of *L'Étoile au Front*. This act will appear in a number of instalments." (The typographers at the newspaper were less pedantic than at the Imprimerie Lemerre, for the word *terrein* is twice spelt "*terrain*".)

WILLY AGAIN

On 22 June, in response to an article by Willy, Roussel sent him a thank-you postcard to Monte Carlo:*

What a magnificent defence!... and what an energetic response to so many fierce attacks! And how much I admired the article itself, while forcing myself to forget what it was about! The mark of the author of *Messieurs de ces dames* can be clearly seen!

A great and warm thank-you.

Raymond Roussel.

I adore "*le dessous... Descartes*"† and "*Cogito Ergot Sum*."

Willy had just published *Les Messieurs de ces dames* (whose title, *Those Ladies' Men*, is sufficiently indicative of its cultural ambitions) with Éditions du Siècle (with a list of thirty-nine errata). We should not be astonished by Roussel's comment — we have already seen what he said to Georges Courteline, and he was later to inscribe to Maurice Dekobra a copy of *Impressions d'Afrique*: "to the author of *Hamydal le philosophe*, with the cordial compliments of a charmed reader", and *L'Étoile au Front* to the author of *Mon cœur au ralenti*: "given with a warm and confraternal 'bravo'". However surprising they seem, these inscriptions to Courteline, Willy and Dekobra confirm Roussel's taste for vaudeville and also for humorous books in a similar vein.

Issue 17 of Francis Picabia's review, 391, had just appeared with a page by Robert Desnos devoted to *L'Étoile au Front*:

By undertaking to unveil the baroque mysteries of human destiny before an assembly of Parisian critics, where doubt is cast cheaply over talent, the surprising existence of M. Raymond Roussel's genius has naturally brought down upon itself a coalition of boulevards, cafés and editorial offices. As for me, drowned in the sludge of imbeciles and dunces, I consider it an honour to have been one of the few who applauded. Human destiny is thus so plain that, when it is explained by means of charming tales, so-called sensible people become enraged and say it was a madman that wrote a play in which the characters are tragically reduced to chess pieces chained by passions such as curiosity, vice, or love [...].

A critic of little value, and a miserable poet, M. Fernand Gregh remarked the other day (in *Nouvelles littéraires*) that, by taking the stories in *L'Étoile au Front* one by one and "beefing them up" to produce 350-page volumes, they would be the most successful contemporary novels of all (like *Atlantide*)!‡

* Postcard depicting Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint John the Baptist* (Musée du Louvre); postmarked Paris, 22.6.1924, 17.00. Jean Bélias Collection; *ibidem* for the following two cards.

† Pun on "*le dessous... des cartes*" (what's under the cards, i.e. "the hidden truth")/ and the hidden truth") and "what's under... Descartes". [Trans.]

‡ A best-selling novel by Pierre Benoit, published in 1918, that mingled exoticism and Greek mythology. [Trans.]

This is really where the shoe pinches.

M. Roussel is too rich, he even remarked on that fact himself in *Locus Solus*. We should now point out that this remark applies not only to his material means, but should also be applied to his mind. I am quite sure that one day men “of talent” will begin churning out successful novels from the work of this “man of genius”, Raymond Roussel. As for me, I have too much faith in the author of *Impressions d’Afrique* to imagine that he will succumb to the temptation of print-runs of a hundred thousand. [...]

On the great poetic plain, young girls walk blindfold towards the north, guided by a mysterious instinct more than by a compass or star. There lies the virgin part of the forest, with its creepers, snakes, treasures, adorable women and marvellously lethal dangers. The axe is there. Soon we will be beyond the reach of dogs and guns.

Something in this article attracted Willy’s attention; the review’s title, 391, is certainly quite puzzling to the uninitiated. On a postcard depicting Raphael’s *Madonna as Beautiful Gardener* (Musée du Louvre), and whose envelope is missing (but Willy, precise as ever, noted: “received 27 June 1924”), Roussel replied:

I have not been able to solve this strange puzzle any more than you. The only writings I have published recently are Acts II and III of *L’Étoile au Front*, which have appeared in a number of instalments in *Comœdia*. I am sending them to you just in case. However, since they were published from 12 to 22 May, I do not see how 17/391 can stand for them. Talking of enigmas, I do not know if I have correctly understood *Cogito ergot sum* and the *dessous Descartes*. I thought I detected an allusion to the last two chapters of *Locus Solus*; does *ergot* [“spur”] relate to Mopsus the cockerel and Descartes to the musical tarot-pack?

Is that correct?

Sincerely yours.

Raymond Roussel.

This is typical of Roussel’s mimicry: “sincerely yours” and “truly yours” [as here in English] were Willy’s customary way of signing letters.

At the bottom of this card Willy sketched out his answer: “Explain [illegible word] *Trépidation* p.126.” For Raymond Roussel had quite simply forgotten that these puns which he was unsure he “correctly understood” had been attributed to him by Robert de Montesquiou in *La Trépidation*.

Roussel explained this memory slip:*

I had forgotten that passage in *La Trépidation*; and it has nothing to do with me, Montesquiou is its sole author. Thank you for re-reading *L’Étoile au Front*. As for me, I often re-read *Les Messieurs de ces dames*.

Truly yours.

Raymond Roussel.

* Postcard depicting Titian’s *Alphonse of Ferrara and Laura of Dianti* (Musée du Louvre); post-marked: Paris, rue de Pontoise, 3 July 1924, 20.00.

This time, Roussel’s boot-licking was more craven than ever. After expressing his pleasure on re-reading Acts II and III of *L’Étoile au Front* which Roussel had sent him, we can easily imagine Willy’s face when he learnt that Roussel “often re-read”

his bread-and-butter bawdy tales. Had Willy had enough? It certainly marked the end of their correspondence.*

FROM LA RÉVOLUTION SURREALISTE TO PAUL REBOUX

It is probably at this period that Raymond Roussel commissioned Henri Zo to paint a picture whose existence was signalled by Michel Leiris, half of which represented “the battle of *Hernani*”, and the other half the Vaudeville theatre during the première of *L’Étoile au Front*. Robert Desnos’s comment, “*Nous sommes la claque et vous êtes la joue*”, was engraved on a brass plaque at the bottom of the frame. What became of this picture which Michel Leiris says he saw in Neuilly? Zo and Roussel thus already knew each other in 1924, which contradicts another piece of information: after 1928, Roussel is supposed to have asked a private detective agency, Goron, to look for an artist capable of illustrating *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* according to his instructions. That artist was Henri Zo.

In October 1924, Raymond Roussel was staying in England, where he seems to have been a frequent visitor. In the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, the last page contains some “correspondence” addressed by his stockbroker, Pierre Leiris, to Benjamin Péret, who had requested an interview with Raymond Roussel:

16 October 1924.

Sir,

M. Raymond Roussel has received your letter. He has been obliged to go away and has asked me to receive you instead of him, if you so desire.

I shall then communicate to him our conversation.

Yours faithfully,

Pierre Leiris.

28 October 1924.

Sir,

Rather than conversing with me, you would no doubt prefer M. Raymond Roussel to write to you.

That is what he has just suggested on the telephone from London. You will simply have to write to Neuilly, your letter will then be sent on to London.

Yours faithfully,

Pierre Leiris.

10 November 1924.

Sir,

M. Raymond Roussel telephoned me this morning from London. He thanks you for your kind letter but feels incapable of answering as regards Surrealism, for he does not consider himself to be part of any school.

Secondly, being rather a specialist reader, he does not know Jarry well enough to be able to judge him properly. As for the questions you were kind enough to ask about his work, he

* Willy died in Paris on 12 January 1931. But, at the end of 1927 and at the beginning of 1928, he was twice knocked down by a car and, very much weakened, presumably made no attempt to continue exchanging letters with Roussel. He certainly did not attend any of the performances of *La Poussière de Soleils*.

fears that, if he answers, he will give an exaggerated importance to his work which would appear full of vanity.

He nevertheless thanks you for your kind and flattering application.

Yours faithfully,

Pierre Leiris.

What curious letters: Benjamin Péret, who often acted as André Breton's factotum, being politely dismissed by Pierre Leiris, as Roussel's secretary! And how could he fear that people might give "an exaggerated importance" to what he writes? Despite his desire to please, was his search for a "sensation of glory" only for and through himself, with no concern about what his admirers might feel about him?

On 12 December 1924, Paul Reboux announced in *Comœdia*, the magazine that just six months before had serialised two acts of *L'Étoile au Front*, that he was preparing a new series of parodies, *À la manière de* [In the Style of]. The earlier volumes of these, written with Charles Müller (killed in 1914), had been a great success:

Here is one of the most delicious and brilliant pastiches, previously unpublished, which we are pleased to say our readers will be the first to see.

Here, M. Paul Reboux wittily rehearses the style of M. Raymond Roussel, author of *Locus Solus* and *L'Étoile au Front*.

Its title was *Pallas Aténia*, and it appears in the third volume (4th series) of *À la manière de*.^{*} In a letter to Roger Vitrac of 22 January 1927, Régis Gignoux expressed his astonishment that Roussel had cited a few lines by Paul Reboux in the inserts in his works, since the pasticheur had "made the cruellest — yet also highly successful — caricature". Paul Reboux simultaneously parodied *Locus Solus* (on the terrace of his Pallas Ataenia villa, Professor Majesty explains to his visitors that he wanted the name to "encapsulate an idea of first-class wisdom... Pallas... A..., along with the notion of solitude... Taenia [i.e. a type of tapeworm]"), and the vertiginous linkages of the dialogues in *L'Étoile au Front*:

SIGISMOND ALARB

Your initial work was relative... At least if I judge by tales of public notoriety...

PROFESSOR MAJESTY

... of the treatment of will-o'-the-wisps with new methods taken from alienist masters. Then I created not rails of veal lights...

HERCULES CUPIDON

... as was mistakenly claimed...

PROFESSOR MAJESTY

... but of rubber, to erase the bad impression caused by railway accidents.

* In the book published the following year by Grasset, this pastiche is dedicated to Camille Lafarge. (See also N. Chaleil, *Trésors du pastiche*, 1971.)

Paul Reboux had of course not understood the “procedure”, but it cannot be denied that he captured Roussel’s tone; and, by adding his own puns, he criticised a procedure he had overlooked by means of an approach that was extremely close to the procedure.

But what interests us about this pastiche is not its good or bad points; it is the fact that in 1924/25 it could get published in the press. Roussel’s work was sufficiently well known by the public for a parody of it to appear in *Comœdia*, after only three performances of *L’Étoile au Front* and its part-serialisation!

Indeed the book was not printed until the beginning of March 1925, and on thicker paper than the previous works. (There were also, of course, unnumbered copies on Japanese vellum.) For some mysterious reason, the Librairie Lemerre did not even deposit it at the Bibliothèque Nationale. It is in this volume that we find on three occasions the spelling *terrein*. It was also the first time that Roussel had a series of quotations from critics inserted into one of his books, facing the title-page, something he would continue to insert into future volumes and into republications of his earlier works.

QUOTATIONS AND INSCRIPTIONS

The first of these booklets, in 1925, brought together extracts from reviews by José Germain, Léon Baranger, Paul Éluard, André Breton, Régine Flory, Les Académisards, Robert Desnos (his rejoinder at the première of *L’Étoile au Front*), René Lalou, Fernand Gregh, Edmond Jaloux, Lugné-Poe, Robert Desnos again, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Henry Bidou, Jane Faure-Lucas, Édouard Dujardin, André Rivoire, Paul Reboux, Jacques-Émile Blanche, Léon Treich, Marcel Arland, and the *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie française*, published by Kra.

In 1927, under the title “Criticism and the Author of *La Poussière de Soleils*”, the insert included “new extracts” by Henry Bidou, Edmond Jaloux, Paul Reboux, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Edmond Rostand, Edmond Sée, the *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Prose française* (Kra), Roger Vitrac, *Comœdia*, *Le Soir*, *Les Annales*, *Mincrva*, Philippe Soupault, the *Nouvelle Revue du Midi*, *La Volonté*, Claude Balleroy, *Le Soir*, *The Era*, *Mattino*, the *New York Herald*, the *Daily Mail*, Louis Laloy, Signoret, *L’Événement*, *Le Plaisir de Vivre*, *Le Cyrano*, Georges Pioch, de Royaumont, Robert de Montesquiou and Gabriel Boissy.

All of these extracts can be found again in the last booklet of sixteen pages, which is the most complete and can be dated to 1932. At the beginning, Raymond Roussel had added Marcel Prévost, Abel Hermant, Jean Richepin, Jacques Sylvain and Jean Cocteau. But the quotation from Roger Vitrac from 1927 had disappeared in 1932 (it should have been on page four), as had the one by the Académisards from the first

booklet (which should have been on page ten). On the other hand, pages fourteen to sixteen feature the latest quotations from the *Nouvelle Revue du Midi*, *L'Intransigeant*, *L'Écho de Paris*, Robert Desnos, *Paris-Soir*, Paul Éluard, Jean-Loup Cohen, Michel Leiris, Jean Pellenc, Tristan Tzara, *Le Petit Journal*, *L'Intransigeant* again, Élie Richard and two rejoinders uttered by Roussel's "supporters" during performances of *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*.

A true Rousselian bibliophile thus cannot be content with merely acquiring copies on Japanese vellum (it is not known how many were printed) or first editions, for the "standard" editions exist in variant states (corrections, booklets of quotations, different covers of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, etc.). In this way, apart from the "general edition" on Japanese vellum of *Locus Solus* (with and without the dedication to his sister), the Roussel fan must also acquire a trade copy of the "tenth edition" of 1932, which contains a sixteen-page booklet of quotations.

Concerning publication of *L'Étoile au Front*, the Académisards had this to say in *France-Soir*:

For those who attended a performance of *L'Étoile au Front*, where a young poet can proudly say that he forced a hostile audience to see his play, this publication of Raymond Roussel's work is welcome. It will allow us to judge the author's poetic conceptions better and the revolution which he has doubtless brought about in the theatre. For those who did not attend this *Hernani*, and who do not know *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, it will reveal an absolutely new world, an original view of the universe, and an undeniable sense of mystery and destiny.

Raymond Roussel sent out copies on Japanese vellum of his book in April. To his sister:

to Ger very very tender recollections. Ray.

To Suzanne Grimpel:

to my dear Suzanne / a token of my very / deep affection / Raymond Roussel / April 1925.

To Michel Leiris's elder sister:

to Madame Jannet / respectfully presented / by a very old friend. / Raymond Roussel / April 1925.

To a friend:

to Madame the Comtesse de Peretti de La Rocca, a respectful token of a very deep and very old affection.

To Jacques Doucet:

to Monsieur Jacques Doucet / presented with grateful / confidence in his excessive indulgence for my works. / Raymond Roussel / April 1925.*

To Dr Pierre Janet:

to Pierre Janet, whose every word should be learnt by heart... with my greatest admiration.†

To the actors in the play:

to Monsieur Puylagarde, who, playing the role of Gaston Joussac at the première of *L'Étoile au Front*, so valiantly braved the storm.

With the author's gratitude.

Raymond Roussel.

And also to writers Roussel admired: to Georges Courteline, "with the compliments of a 'fan'"; but especially "to Paul Bourget, that splendid summit which radiates over our era, with very enthusiastic and affectionate compliments".

DESNOS, VITRAC, BOIFFARD AND MICHEL LEIRIS

Finally, to Robert Desnos, a fine inscription which mentions his intervention at the Théâtre du Vaudeville:

to Robert Desnos / who, at the première of *L'Étoile au Front*, when one of my adversaries cried out "*Hardi la claque!*", so wittily retorted with his famous phrase: "*Nous sommes la claque et vous êtes la joue!*" His grateful

Raymond Roussel / April 1925.

Robert Desnos thanked him at once:

Dear Sir,

When I read *L'Étoile au Front* I experienced the same metaphysical sensation that was caused by your other books. I admire the astonishing genius that allows you to evoke destiny and the sober pathos which is one of your work's characteristics. What is marvellous is that, during the reading, emotion emerges as though sublimated, but without being any less intense than the impression created by the performance. When one reads dramatists who write plays for the Boulevard, their faults and vices of both form and thought emerge; whereas your full style is utterly appropriate to a rigorous thinking which results, I think, from a perfect knowledge of poetic regions unknown to the vulgar. Finally, may I thank you for your flattering inscription and send you my devotion and sincere admiration.

Robert Desnos.‡

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet.

† L'Intersigne, catalogue 8, "Fous littéraires et Cie", May 1987.

‡ The letters from Raymond Roussel to Robert Desnos are held in the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet; those from Robert Desnos to Raymond Roussel in the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Robert Desnos did not stop at a thank-you letter. He also sent Raymond Roussel a copy of *Deuil pour deuil** (published in 1924), and was himself thanked by a card:

A thousand thanks, my dear *confrère*, both for your delightful gift, and for the great pleasure which — I know in advance — I shall have when reading it.

And on 1 June 1925, Robert Desnos published a review in the “Books of the Month” column of *La Revue européenne*:

... When reading it, *L'Étoile au Front* seemed as beautiful as when it was performed. I must say how much its style is perfect and new; how much cunning is used in the plot of Act I, which is immediately abandoned, and which shows that extraordinary events can visit anybody, just as they visit these minor collectors, these timorous bourgeois; how much humour there is in the linking of the dialogues, and what pure poetry envelops this play.

In it, Raymond Roussel's genius appears indisputable. The star whose mysterious influence he evokes has been revealed to the eyes of that extraordinary astronomer and new constellations are born with each of his words.†

Another calling-card from Raymond Roussel:

How much gratitude I owe you, my dear *confrère*... And how much I admired the article itself!... And how many times I re-read it from pure dilettantism, while trying to forget that I was its hero!... With all my grateful affection.

Raymond Roussel.

The beautiful work on *Deuil pour deuil* absolutely captivated me!

Robert Desnos plucked up his courage and requested some books:

Monday [22 June 1925].

My dear *confrère*,

I am having inscribed copies of my first four books sent to you.

But I should not like this letter to prevent me from thanking you in person for your kind request.

Would it suit you to come to Neuilly one day towards the end of the afternoon? for example, next Monday 29 June at about 6.30?

If not, tell me what times would suit you better.

With my greatest confraternal affection,

Raymond Roussel.

* Librairie du Bois, list 18, no. 46 (winter 1996).

† This is perhaps the occasion to mention the publication of Robert Desnos's *La Place de l'Étoile*, in Rodez, November 1945, in Gaston Ferdière's “Humour” collection. For this Rousselian, what could the place of the star be, except on the forehead?

Three of these four books are today kept in the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet:

La Doublure:

to my young *confrère* / Robert Desnos / in answer to his kind request, I present this work written in my early youth. / Raymond Roussel / June 1925.

La Vue:

to Robert Desnos / to my indulgent reader / a token of my greatest confraternal affection / Raymond Roussel / June 1925.

A copy of *Locus Solus* on Japanese vellum, without the dedicatory card to his sister:

to Robert Desnos, a token of thanks for his beautiful article about *L'Étoile au Front*. / Raymond Roussel / June 1925.

After Roussel's death, Robert Desnos described this visit of 29 June 1925:

I knew him... as much as anyone could know a man who let nobody penetrate his intimacy. I remember the first visit I made to Neuilly. He had asked me to call at six o'clock. At the appointed time, I rang at the door of a sumptuous villa on Boulevard Wallace. A concierge asked me through the bars if I had an appointment, checked my name, unlocked the door and, letting me in, pointed out a Norman house, partly hidden by the garden trees. I crossed a rose patch. To my left, a pond glistened in the hollow of a lawn. I was still twenty metres from the house, when the door opened apparently all on its own. I went up the steps. A huge valet, stiff as a rake, and silent as the grave, took my hat and pointed me towards another door. Behind it, I found a second valet, just as stiff and even taller. With his hand he indicated a small study where I went and sat down. A few minutes later, Roussel appeared, coming down a wooden staircase. He received me extremely affably, but no matter how hard I tried the conversation remained an impersonal chat, as though "about the weather", despite the highly precise questions I asked him, and which he answered just as precisely.

It was at about the same time ("two years" after the performance of *Locus Solus*) that Raymond Roussel agreed to receive Roger Vitrac:

I had already put myself as much as possible on guard concerning the appearance of the enigmatic and courteous man I imagined, and was ill at ease as much about our meeting as about the appointed place, which was not his home, but a woman's flat [Charlotte Dufrène's, near the Champs Élysées, at 47, Rue Pierre-Charron]. All I can remember of our first conversation is Raymond Roussel's marvellous dentition, and I could not help associating those extraordinary teeth with Roussel's singular determination to have a producer of precision instruments manufacture a small platinum fork which Canterel used at the theatre for removing teeth, employing some strange electromagnetic procedure. The only contribution which the author made to the production of *Locus Solus* was that extraordinary and useless artefact. [...]

Raymond Roussel opened the door himself. I noticed my latest book — as is the custom — lying in view on the corner of the mantelpiece, but positioned in such a way that I could not see if it had been cut or not. When I sat down, Roussel said at once:

"It's very good. We thoroughly enjoyed reading *Le Gout du sang* ["The Taste of Blood"], and were re-reading it just now."

At that moment, I remembered Canterel's disturbing notion:

"Well, as for me, in a better world, I should willingly eat men."

Robert Desnos was not the only young Surrealist to praise Roussel's work. In the fourth issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (15 July 1925), Paul Éluard wrote:

There stand the narrators. One begins, the other continues. They are marked with the same sign; they are prey to the same imagination, which carries the earth and heavens on its head.

All of the world's stories are woven by their words, all of the universe's stars are on their foreheads, mysterious mirrors of the magic of dreams and the strangest most marvellous facts. Will they amuse those insects that make dull music as they think and eat, which hardly listen to them and do not understand the greatness of their ravings?

As magicians, they transform pure and simple words into a mass of characters thrown about by objects of passion, and hold a ray of gold in their hands, the hatching-out of truth, dignity, liberty, happiness and love.

Let Raymond Roussel show us what has never been. We are those to whom this reality alone matters.

In the same issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, Jacques-André Boiffard included Roussel in his *Nomenclature*:

Raymond Roussel

— The redness of the world smiles at your armpits.

In autumn 1924, Michel Leiris requested a meeting:

Thursday.

My dear Michel,

Thank you for your kind thought.

I should be delighted to see you. Would one day at about 6.00 suit you? If yes, tell me, and we shall fix a day. If not, tell me what you would prefer.

Affectionately,

Raymond Roussel.

In 1935, Michel Leiris remembered “giving him great delight when, quite by chance, I praised the extraordinary brevity (so much so that when performed on stage, the text was difficult to follow) of each of the anecdotes that make up *L'Étoile au Front*”. “I endeavoured to tell each story using the fewest possible words,” Raymond Roussel replied.

As early as 1910, he told the American journalist Sterling Heiling that he submitted the proofs of his books to his concierge, chauffeur, groom, maid, chambermaid and his mother's second cook. His private secretary, steward, chief cook and dressmakers were judged to be too sophisticated. If a sentence, or even a word, was unintelligible to the humblest servant, then the passage was simply suppressed.

According to Michel Leiris: “Roussel told me that all he wanted was to express himself impeccably as regards vocabulary and grammar, in order to be as clear and concise as possible” (*Gulliver*, number 4).

He suggested meeting Raymond Roussel... in a museum!

Monday.

My dear Michel,

I already know the Musée des Arts et Métiers which is, indeed, extremely interesting.

But for us to meet, it is not necessary to visit a museum. Would you like to come to Neuilly at about 5.45 next Friday? If not, tell me which days and times would suit you next week.

With my respectful compliments to Mme Leiris and my affectionate thoughts to you.

Raymond Roussel.

Michel Leiris reported their conversation: "Starting with Foucault's pendulum, looms, Ader's aeroplane and other curiosities that can be seen at the Musée des Arts et Métiers (which I had been so naïve as to ask Roussel to visit with me, when I should have realised that he had long known it)", he pulled his guest into a whirlwind of knowledge and scientific interests. "He was ecstatic about percolators"... and also admired Einstein. And, as he told Charlotte Dufrène, he was sure that sooner or later a way to travel back in time would be found — and perhaps to recover a sensation of glory and youth?

THE MOTORISED CARAVAN AND "THE USE OF VACUUM"

"A comfortable adventure in a motorised caravan," noted Michel Leiris in his *Journal* on 24 October 1924. "The conversation concluded on the touring caravan which Roussel had had built, after touching on several other topics, such as Chinese ideograms, an Oceanic puzzle he had in his room, the midnight sun, mineral deposits and oil wells, and finally — via the last link in the chain — that undertaking to prospect the virgin lands of the mind which had become part of Roussel's writings."

"In fact, he was prone to whims... Suddenly he said to himself: 'I'll go travelling in a caravan...' He did so for a year, then afterwards never used it again." Michel Ney has committed a slight mistake here: Roussel used his "caravan", as he modestly called it, for two consecutive years. As for his "whim", it had been thoroughly thought out. As early as *La Doublurc*, Gaspard slept in a "showman's caravan" in the group of strolling players that employed him in Neuilly. Roussel told Robert Desnos that one disagreeable memory of his trip round the world was having to "change beds". To Roger Vitrac he said: "It is extremely pleasant. One stops wherever one wants. It is a veritable land yacht. And one is alone." "Alone?" I asked him. "But what about the world...?" "Oh yes, how true, but villages can be avoided." The caravan above all allowed Roussel to avoid hotels and the annoyance of a service that was often below what he was accustomed to. For the countryside he travelled through did not really interest him. He read instead of looking at it. He did not take entire books, but torn-off pages he kept stuffed in his pockets. Roussel hated people seeing him read!

The caravan was exhibited at the Salon de l'auto exhibition of 1925. It was built by Georges Régis, coach-maker, "promoter of the *Road Yacht*, 14, Rue Sainte-Isaure, Paris 18^e", who published a special brochure for handing out at the following year's show, with "M. Raymond Roussel's lounge-car" in pride of place. It was given an entire page in *L'Illustration* of 26 February 1926 under the title: "Advanced Tourism: THE NOMADIC VILLA". The anonymous columnist pulled no punches:

The day after the first victory at the Battle of the Marne, Marshal Joffre, then a general, was asked what he intended to do after the war, and the great soldier made no bones about admitting, with his usual *bonhomie*, that all he really desired was to tour France in short stages, via the wonderful network of liquid roads formed by its canals, aboard a barge equipped as a floating chalet. And, once peace had arrived, the victor of those great days in September 1914 allowed himself the pleasure he had described.

Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more agreeable way to travel or one more fertile in its constantly changing sensations than a means that allows you to "gather the day" according to your itinerant whims, under whichever heaven charms you, amid the landscape that ravishes your eyes, yet without giving up a single one of your habits, while continuing to benefit from all the advantages of your usual dwelling, and, finally, giving you the unique satisfaction of travelling without leaving your "home sweet home".

M. Raymond Roussel, as much an innovator in tourism as he surely is in literature, with his *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, has adapted the Marshal's idea perfectly. He has had built, according to his own designs, a giant automobile, measuring 9m by 2.3m containing, by means of a series of ingenious arrangements, a lounge, a studio, a bedroom, a bathroom and even a sort of small dormitory for his staff of three men — two chauffeurs and a valet.*

Then, after a brief technical description illustrated by six photographs, the columnist concluded:

A day will come when many "nomadic villas" will be seen on the world's highways, thus reviving, for their occupants' refined pleasure, a by-gone age of wandering shepherds and the recently abolished era of fresh air and absolute freedom beneath the heavens.

A few months later, two pages illustrated by the same photographs were published in the August 1926 issue of the *Revue du Touring-Club de France*: "The Complete Campsite in an Automobile: M. Raymond Roussel's TOURING HOUSE". The columnist gave the same technical details as in *L'Illustration*:

The bodywork manufactured by Lacoste is extremely elegant and its interior layout is as original as it is ingenious. Here are two examples: during the day, the bedroom can be converted into a studio or lounge; as for the front area (behind the driver's seat), at night it becomes a small bedroom where the three men mentioned above can make themselves comfortable and have a wash (there is a wash-basin in the panelling which can be seen to the left of the driver and the steering wheel).

The interior of M. Raymond Roussel's touring house was decorated by Maple.

There is electric heating and a petrol stove. The bath-heater also works on petrol.

The furnishings have been conceived to answer to every need. There is even a Fichet safe.

* Pierre Tremblay, his valet and butler since 1910.

LA REVUE DU TOURING CLUB DE FRANCE

LE CAMPING INTÉGRAL PAR L'AUTOMOBILE

LA MAISON ROULANTE de M. Raymond Roussel

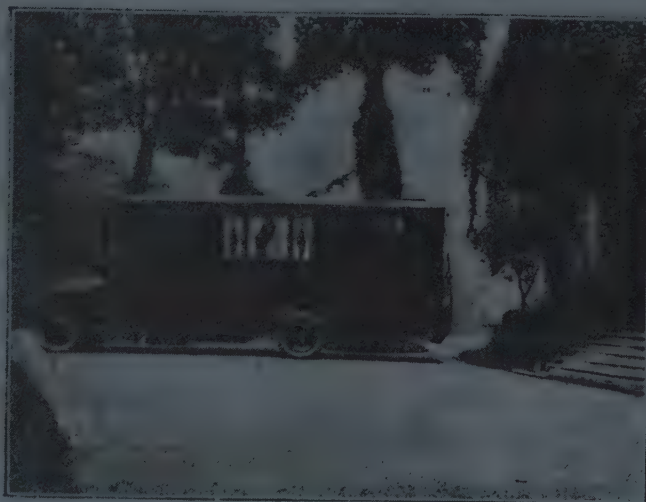


Fig. 1. — La « roulotte automobile » photographée dans la propriété de M. Raymond Roussel, à Neuilly.

Nous n'avons pas ici la prétention d'apprendre aux lecteurs de la *Revue* du T. C. F. ce qu'est le Camping ni de leur énumérer les joies profondes qu'il procure à ses adeptes.

En effet, dans presque tous les numéros, un campeur nous crie son allégresse de s'en aller le long des routes, libre, fort, de s'arrêter à sa fantaisie près d'un ruisseau, dans une

prairie, dans un champ, dans une forêt, de coucher enfin sous le ciel immense à l'abri d'un toit léger, loin des autres hommes qui dorment dans les maisons.

Nous voulons simplement signaler un mode extrêmement ingénieux et confortable de pratiquer le camping intégral.

M. Baudry de Saunier dans son

livre la « joie du camping » sépare les adeptes du camping en deux tribus, qui se jalourent un peu certes, mais qui s'aiment bien tout de même parce qu'en somme elles ont le même drapeau : la tribu des *Spartiates* et celle des *Sybarites*.

Les Spartiates ce sont ceux qui s'en vont, soit à pied, soit à bicyclette, en emportant leur maison sur leur dos (une maison de toile qui ne pèse pas 10 kilos avec tout son mobilier). Ce sont les valeureux, les vaillants du camping.

Les Sybarites au contraire ce sont ceux qui font porter leur maison par un véhicule automobile. Et cette maison, ils la veulent bien entendu aussi confortable que possible. Ils entendent retrouver en plein bois ou en plein champs, les douceurs et les avantages du home famillier.

C'est donc pour les Sybarites surtout que nous allons décrire la très luxueuse et très pratique maison roulante conçue par M. Raymond Roussel. L'auteur d'*Impressions d'Afrique*, dont tant d'esprits distingués vantent le génie, a fait établir sur ses plans, une automobile de 9 mètres de long sur 2 mètres 30 de large.

Cette voiture est une véritable petite maison. Elle comporte en effet, par suite de dispositions ingénieuses : un salon, (fig. 2), une chambre à coucher (fig. 3), un studio (fig. 4), une salle de bains (fig. 6), et même un



Fig. 2. — Le salon-chambre à coucher sous son aspect de salon, orné de glaces, éclairé par de larges baies et muni de fauteuils confortables.

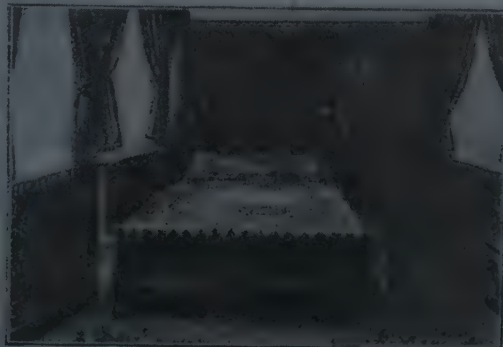


Fig. 3. — Le salon-chambre à coucher disposé pour la nuit. On dissimule le lit qui, pendant le jour, est dissimulé dans l'encastrement de la cloison.

An excellent wireless installation allows all of Europe's stations to be received.

This somewhat brief description shows that this veritable touring villa — which can be completed with a kitchen-trailer — allows its owner to retain all of the comforts of his home sweet home, in a slightly reduced area.

This luxurious installation has been mounted on a Saurer chassis. On level ground, its normal speed is 40 kilometres per hour. Even the steepest descents can be made without any worries thanks to an engine braking system.

The steering is extremely supple, which is much to be appreciated on mountain roads.

The author of this article nevertheless had to point out that “not everyone, of course, can afford this complete solution to camping”. Indeed not. This touring house, no doubt inspired by Jules Verne's *Maison à vaporeur*, cost one million francs; but it has to be said that no expense was spared on the decorations, made of rare woods and mirrors.

Eugène Canseliet reported that, late one afternoon in 1925, Roussel gave him and Julien Champagne a lift home, causing a crowd to gather and stopping the tram from going up Rue Rochechouart.

Just after construction was finished [the columnist in the *Revue du Touring-Club de France* went on], the caravan set off during the summer on a 3000 kilometre tour around Switzerland and Alsace. Each evening, M. Roussel had a new horizon.

He has brought back incomparable impressions from his trip.

On his return, the caravan was not parked in the outhouses of Boulevard Richard-Wallace, but on the other side of the Seine at the Garage Péruse, 92, Avenue de la Défense, in Courbevoie (it is useless today to look for any trace of it under the skyscrapers of La Défense). This is doubtless one reason why Charlotte Dufrène never went inside it. In 1961, Michel Leiris noted in his *Journal* that she still had photos of it: “Much vaster and more sumptuous than the ones made nowadays. In the photograph, it looks like a real railway-carriage, and one of the photos of the interior shows a bedroom with a double bed.”

Élie Richard saw Roussel “sitting in his glass cage, or dreaming in his plush seat, a dinner-jacketed driver watching over his wheel”.^{*} He was so proud of his caravan that he had postcards made of it, which he handed out to his visitors. In memory of his tour of 1925, he inscribed a copy on Japanese vellum of *La Poussière de Soleils* to Étienne Ganderax: “with deeply respectful compliments from a Romany who was delighted to be able to welcome you to his caravan in Évier”. From the Pension Blausee in Kanderthal (which seems to indicate that Roussel did not always stay in his caravan) he sent a postcard to Pierre Leiris (a photograph of some trout: “*Forellen im Blausee*”):

My dear Pierre,

Bravo for the sales of Mining, etc! And thank you for the good news you sent me of your family. I shall not need to procure money in Geneva, so all is well. My passport number is

^{*} *Paris-Midi*, 9 October 1927.

32725. Agreed for M. Féodoroff; please also make a second quarterly payment in October to Madame Cassellari. After Switzerland I intend to visit Alsace, then the battlefields, where the comfort of my caravan will be particularly appreciable! Affectionately yours as ever,
Raymond Roussel.

From the same place, he sent a postcard to the critic René Lalou:

Dear Sir,

I am at present touring in a motorised caravan and I have only just now discovered your charming letter and your beautiful article at the *poste restante*. I hardly need tell you how much it means to me to have the support of the editor of *Le Chef* and how proud I am that I shall soon appear in the *Histoire de la littérature française contemporaine*. What an excellent reply to my numerous detractors are such appreciations signed by your name.

With many thanks. Yours faithfully,

Raymond Roussel.*

In 1926, Roussel published the following extracts from this article:

This writer-magician is Raymond Roussel... *Impressions d'Afrique* would be enough to win his renown as an innovator... *Locus Solus* is a prodigious mixture of erudition and fantasy... The disconcerting richness of Raymond Roussel's precise vocabulary overlays and objectifies that perpetual upsurging of modern marvels which characterises his art... *L'Étoile au Front* will delight the careful reader and make him want to read the entire works — works and the laboratory of future works — from which, at every turn, eternal magic bursts.

On 6 February 1926, Roussel thanked this critic for citing him in the October 1925 supplement of his *Histoire de la littérature française contemporaine*, the first edition of which had come out in 1922:

A thousand thanks, Sir and dear *confrère*, for sending me your beautiful book.

The more I read it, the prouder I am to be included.

With my best confraternal wishes,

Raymond Roussel.†

In the final edition of 1941, the passage about Roussel was written with a splendid sureness of touch:

Without doubt, the man who tried most resolutely to transform the theatre into a sort of magic mirror was Raymond Roussel, whom Jean Cocteau defined as follows in his *Opium*: "He is a hanging universe of elegance, fancy and fear." This fact is all the more striking because Roussel's poems appear bare and cold at first glance, and come to life only at a second reading. But his *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) will be enough to make him renowned as an innovator: in this visionary text, which surpasses Lautréamont, he now seems, by some strange anticipation, to be the Marcel Proust of mental legerdemain. *Locus Solus* (1914), a tale of experiments set up by a disciple of Paracelsus, is rather reminiscent of Villiers...

* B.N. Manuscripts Dept., René Lalou archives. Postcard: "View of the Lötschberg road".

† B.N. Manuscripts Dept.

Raymond Roussel was certainly less and less alone. "The number of my partisans constantly increased," he wrote.

We would be wrong to think that this millionaire spent his money with only the intention of writing and publishing what he had written. He wanted to be a universal man. Just as Gérard de Nerval patented a type-setting machine, Charles Cros a colour-photograph projector, Alphonse Allais a sort of instant coffee and Boris Vian an elastic wheel, on 18 September 1922 Raymond Roussel submitted his first patent application, which was granted on 14 December 1923 and published on 12 March 1924 by the Office national de la propriété industrielle. (Meanwhile, on 5 July 1923, then again on 19 July, he submitted additions, the second of which was published only on 16 January 1925.) This invention was nothing less than "the use of a vacuum for the non-loss of heat in everything concerning the house and locomotion". Apparently the O.N.P.I. pointed out the ambiguity of the patent, and of its two successive riders, because on 11 September 1923, shortly after its submission, Victor Prévost, a civil engineer and adviser on industrial property, dwelling at 22, Boulevard Voltaire, Paris XI^e, was appointed by Raymond Roussel as his proxy and lodged a third addition, which was in fact the true patent in its final form: "Although the descriptive texts [...] were written in a precise manner, we have thought it useful, so that the invention can be clearly understood", to combine the descriptions into a single text, with references to just one page of drawings.

Having noticed that dwellings and vehicles are "unfortunately heat permeable", the idea was to conserve their coolness in summer and their warmth in winter. By limiting the exchanges of temperature through the walls, it would be possible to make "in winter a saving in fuel of up to, no doubt, 90%". A saving which, it must be admitted, has rarely been reached!

The aim of the invention is to place a material within the walls, roofs, floors, ceilings and doors of dwellings and in the bodywork of vehicles, which is capable of reducing to a minimum or even eliminating heat loss. According to the context, this material would be hollow metal plates or broad flat glass flasks, with a vacuum created within. In order to apply the same principle to windows, simple panes of glass would be replaced by hermetically sealed double panes, with a vacuum between them.

Roussel also envisaged that the hollow plates around a room might be linked together by means of tubes, one of which would lead into the room and be "sealed by a plug". Thus, if any air had entered, one could simply re-establish a vacuum by means of a pneumatic pump.

This final patent, numbered 28.628, was delivered on 15 December 1924, and published on 17 January 1925. A few days later, the same adviser sent Raymond Roussel a brochure concerning the sealed orders he should send to the Académie des sciences, the only point of which being to date the device and check that there are

no previous versions of the inventions or discoveries which it is supposed to contain; but it gives no copyright.

Raymond Roussel was not the sort of inventor who contents himself with pure speculation: as an experiment, he had a small cubic room constructed under a garage at the back of his garden in Neuilly, according to the norms contained in his patent.

Why did Raymond Roussel bother to lodge this patent to protect a "procedure" which had nothing to do with literature, at the same time as he was having *L'Étoile au Front* performed, designing his "caravan" and writing another play? Did he imagine that its application might plug the gap in his capital? But it would seem that, apart from his valet Pierre Tremblay, very few people were aware of his scheme.

LA POUSSIÈRE DE SOLEILS

Meanwhile, according to Michel Leiris, someone had suggested to Roussel that he might write a more spectacular, "Châtelet-style"*, play. He once again stopped composing *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in order to write *La Poussière de Soleils*.

After having been initially programmed for 8 February, the full dress-rehearsal took place at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin on 2 February 1926, at 1.15 in the afternoon. "I am *devastated* that I cannot attend," wrote Michel Leiris, who was in fact getting married that day! But, as a newspaper column of 18 January pointed out, "since this show is important, like its predecessors," two other private performances were scheduled for Wednesday 3 and Friday 5 in the theatre "currently being made illustrious by *Cyrano*. Unwilling to witness this adventure, but determined to pick up the profit, Maurice Lehman [the director] has fled to the Côte d'Azur," reported *Fantasio* on 1 March.

Eugène Canseliet thought he saw in the play's title an expression "of the most extreme division of alchemical gold, which is the star of the wise, and of true poets, each particle of which, as in the old Catholic Latin host, remains the entirety of Christ and the Sun, despite all ruptures". The title is less esoteric if we see it as a homage to Camille Flammarion; the last scene reads like an extract from *Uranie*. In his *Astronomie populaire* (1879), Flammarion had already written that stars were "the suns of space". And later, in the issue of the review *Je sais tout* for 15 July 1908 (which also contained Jean Cocteau's first published poem), there is an article by the astronomer entitled "Worlds, Dust of the Infinite": "... each star is a sun, shining with its own light, thousands and millions of times larger than our own globe. And yet, they are so numerous, so close together on maps of the heavens and in photographs, that we have a veritable dust of suns before our eyes."

However, like the Milky Way, the thread — or the "chain" as Jean Ferry rightly put it — is a path whose dust is made up of millions of "suns", that is to say of new

* The Châtelet was a theatre in the centre of Paris specialising in lavish "spectaculars". [Trans.]

tales, each one of them independent and yet chained to what comes next. In this way, Roussel wrapped up several meanings in his title. So isn't it strange that, just two years later, he wrote *La Poussière de Soleil*, in the singular? (Though it is true that this was a text* typed out by a secretary, which Roussel may not have re-read.)

Lucien Descaves was unable to see the play, and explained himself in the following terms in *L'Intransigeant* of 5 February 1926: "By making his dress rehearsal clash with that of the Comédie Française, M. Raymond Roussel has presumably decided to deprive the critics of the pleasure of seeing a new play by the author of *Impressions d'Afrique*. But this is a mere postponement. We shall read M. Raymond Roussel's *La Poussière de Soleils* when it has been published, and thus the money he has spent, which we have heard was considerable, will not have been entirely wasted."

It is true that Roussel seems to have regretted the meagre budget of *L'Étoile au Front* and thus returned to the sort of grandiose conception he had had for *Locus Solus*: sets by Numa and Chazot, costumes by Jenny Carré, music by Marius-François Gaillard, and the play directed by A. Caillard (who played Zuméranaz).

Le Panurge of 11 August 1933 was to recall the amount of money spent:

For the show at the Porte-Saint-Martin [...] in an exceptional matinée performance, Raymond Roussel had paid twice the usual rent for the theatre. And the fees paid to the actors were colossal. One actor, for three days' work, was paid three thousand francs by this patron.

During the rehearsals, the only person in the auditorium was the author. But the cast acted as though to a full house to give this generous man the greatest possible pleasure.

The day before the full dress-rehearsal, M. Raymond Roussel handed round small sealed envelopes containing a bonus of 10% over the promised fees. This was so that the performers of his work might buy a little souvenir.

According to the "*Mare aux cabots*" in *Fantasio* (1 March 1926):

M. Raymond Roussel has granted himself the luxury of putting M. Pierre Wolff in difficulty. While his tearful *Secret de Polichinel* was being revived at the Comédie-Française, the author of *Locus Solus*, throwing his money around once more, was making fools of his guests.

Roussel was not bragging when he wrote: "People fought over the seats for the première and there was a huge crowd." A columnist confirmed this on 2 February: "Word of a new play by Raymond Roussel has provoked such a wave of curiosity that people are fighting over the invitations." Roussel: "Many came just for the pleasure of attending a riotous evening and of taking part in it. However, the performance was quiet." In his press release,† he asked the following question: will his new play "have, like its predecessors, the twofold good fortune of being passionately admired by the élite and ferociously attacked by the mediocre? This is the best the author can hope for."

* Archives of the Chancellery of the *Légion d'honneur*.

† *La Liberté*, 27 January 1926. It is at the end of this puff that Roussel announced proudly that he had won forty-five pistol-shooting medals, and in particular the Gastinne-Renette gold medal in 1909.

Those for him are his fanatics; those against him are relentlessly so. The former consider him to be one of the greatest original minds that has ever existed, a sort of Richard Wagner of literature; the latter, as a hoaxer or madman. Will *La Poussière de Soleils* open their reluctant eyes?

"The play was received calmly. Perhaps it flabbergasted the auditorium."*... "A less vehement house than usual."†... "People were a little disappointed, for they were expecting more comic fantasy, outrageous oddness and, if I may say so, militant Dadaism. *Locus Solus*, with its infamous 'rails of veal lights', had whetted the public's appetite, and they went to the Porte-Saint-Martin in order to devour the lion tamer, and in eager anticipation of the usual set-to. They were in for a disappointment."‡

As for Raymond Roussel himself, he was expecting the worst. After Michel Leiris had thanked him for the invitation to the dress rehearsal, which he could not attend because of his wedding, Roussel told him that he was counting on his active presence:

28.1.26.

How touched I was, my dear Michel, by your magnificent letter! I shall send you tickets for the other performances, for then too I shall need true friends in the audience!

With all my heart,

Raymond Roussel.

The only "incidents" were reported by the *Nouveau Siècle* of 4 February:

The author had arranged his audience in a strange fashion: next to the critics sat a true Saturday night Châtelet crowd suited to his play, and then his friends, a lot of extremely young friends who are so-called poets...

They were distributed in packs of two or three and rather rudely shouted at those spectators who dared to laugh. As soon as one tableau had finished, they clapped fit to bring the house down; when a critic remarked to one of them that they were drowning out Marius-François Gaillard's music, they replied: "That doesn't interest us." A firm opinion if ever there was one.

And *Paris-Midi* of 3 February, in an article entitled "Sun Burn" and signed Paul A.:

Just occasionally, a line caused mirthful outbreaks. And yet the entire Dada party was in attendance. We even saw M. André Breton stand up at one point when nobody was saying anything and suddenly cry into the silence:

"Shut up, you idiots!"

Nobody knows to whom this was addressed.

A lady in the balcony also yelled:

"Nitwit!", the destination of which remained just as mysterious, unless it were a rapid examination of her own mind.

M. Yvan Noe also got to his feet and was seen to stare darkly behind himself towards an invisible enemy... "Where are They, then? Where are the Baboons?"

One critic summed up his opinion by saying:

"We've been robbed. He's 'scuppered' his play."

* The *Daily Mail* (booklet of quotations, 1927).

† Étienne Rey, *Comœdia*, 3 February 1926.

‡ Edmond Sée, *L'Œuvre*, 3 February 1926.

Raymond Roussel had indeed been extremely generous with invitations for his young friends. In Robert Desnos's papers,* three calling-cards bear witness to this fact:

Here you are, dear *confrère*. Thank you with all my heart for the support you have promised me!
Raymond Roussel.

31.1.26.

My dear *confrère*,
The message has been passed on to the ticket office.
Thank you for your encouragement and confraternally yours,
Raymond Roussel.

In pencil, on the back of a calling-card:

Ten tickets for Wednesday and ten for Friday. Raymond Roussel.

But he also invited his faithful old friends:

[Friday 5 February 1926.]
4, Square du Roule.

My dear Sir and friend,
My children and I were delighted at your wonderful success yesterday [Thursday] at the Porte-Saint-Martin. An attentive house enjoyed your play as it should, and was able to do it justice. I need not tell you that we whole-heartedly applauded this new artistic venture of yours. Please accept, dear Monsieur Raymond, my thanks and best wishes.

Rose Caron.

On 1 March, *Fantasio* pointed out the presence of other friends of the author, who were applauding loudly:

If one excepts the vociferations of a few well-paid partisans, and the enthusiasm of Mme Rosemonde Gérard and Maurice Rostand who, in a stage-box, were applauding like crazy, this show, which would have gone down well at the Châtelet, was swamped in a sea of tedium.

Not the slightest punch-up, not the slightest slap. The spectators clearly felt that they had been robbed and vaguely hoped that, when leaving, M. Raymond Roussel might at last give some sign of originality by giving them a few bank-notes.

What a delicate wit! And what a pity it is that Roussel did not offer himself the luxury of kicking *Fantasio*'s "*Cochon de payant*" [i.e. a mug who pays for his seat] in the rear, given the fact that he had not "paid" any more than the other guests! But Roussel held nothing against even the rudest critics. For example, when Pierre Veber wrote in the *Petit Journal* of 4 February:

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet
(with all the letters from Roussel
to Desnos).

I heard people leaving the theatre saying: "What a let-down! The author is no longer deranged. He has written an almost reasonable play, which isn't even boring. There's no fun

to be had any more!" And it's true; the audience at the dress rehearsal was disappointed; it had come to kick up a fuss and protest! But the play was so peaceful that it had to give the idea up; we are a long way away from the rails of veal lights and the one-legged man playing the flute on his tibia.

Roussel immediately sent him a signed copy of *Impressions d'Afrique* (marked "second edition", even though the date is the same as the first), with this inscription which covers the entire half-title page:

Dear Monsieur Pierre Veber, how happy I was that your charming article now allows me to tell you, as I have wanted but not dared to do for so long, how much I adore your plays, which I regularly go to see a dozen times. Last winter, I went each Thursday to see the matinée of *Monsieur de cinq heures* from the same box (I can assure you that the ticket clerk knows my chauffeur well, who made the reservations). I stopped only during the period when Le Gallo was replaced. Last summer, during a tour, I saw *Monsieur de cinq heures* once more in a town in the east, in Nancy, I think.

A warm thank-you from your tireless fan.

Raymond Roussel.

February 1926.

I have marked the two passages where there is mention of the rails of veal lights. You will see that they are better placed in the book than in the play.*

But did this help Pierre Veber understand any better?

As for Antoine, who had sworn not to fall for Roussel again, he was incapable of resisting. He explained his position in *L'Information* (8 February):

Last year, I asked M. Raymond Roussel to send me no more invitations when he had a new work performed, and he was good enough to respect my wishes. I am grateful to him, for he has saved me from being unnecessarily unpleasant to him when talking about this *Poussière de Soleils*, privately performed on three occasions at the Porte-Saint-Martin. I thus cannot comment on the play, and the reviews by my more fortunate colleagues have not given me any bitter regrets.

However, as I love to keep a close eye on every aspect of our theatrical life, on which it is my job to report to our readers, I went with a friend who invited me to his box. What interested me most were the reactions of the audience and the chance to see if people really went to these performances with more than just amused curiosity.

This time, Antoine had nothing to say about the actors. He simply finished with these words: "Really, M. Raymond Roussel got his money's worth." The poor man was obsessed!

On the other hand, on 7 February *Aux Écoutes* reported some malicious gossip concerning Germaine Risse (who played Solange):

For new actresses:

Mlle Germaine Risse has a strange destiny. This pretty actress also has talent, but she has had difficulty displaying it.

* The margins are marked from pages 8 to 10 and from 419 to 425. Bibliothèque de François Sullerot.

It is a secret to nobody that Mlle Germaine Risse used to have a wealthy protector. She was then nicknamed "the little chocolate girl" and directors pushed her aside, falsely alleging that she "paid to perform". Have these virtuous directors now changed their minds?

So it was that the artiste hardly ever performed, even though the role of *Peg de mon cœur* had put her at the forefront of the profession.

Today Mlle Germaine Risse is alone. Her protector has lost his fortune and suddenly — as if by magic — this young actress is in constant demand. She has been applauded at the *Œuvre*, she has been applauded at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*. She is on every stage.

What a good lesson to young actresses looking for support.

The play was presumably cast by Callamand once again, who in 1926 played Villenave (before handing the part over in 1927 to Deluc).

Characters	Cast (original production)	Cast (revival)
<i>Blache</i>	MM. Candé	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Réard</i>	Joffre	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Courneleux</i>	Numès	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Zuméranaz</i>	Adrien Caillard	<i>Id.</i>
<i>The Moron</i>	Tunc	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Gariot</i>	Saillard	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Jacques</i>	Abel Jacquin	Roger Constant
<i>Villenave</i>	L. Callamand	Deluc
<i>Fuzelier</i>	Ch. Hémery	Jean d'Yd
<i>Kléossem</i>	A. Marshal	Gorieux
<i>Marcenac</i>	Maurice Bénard	Lesieur
<i>Léonce</i>	Numès <i> fils</i>	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Flurian</i>	Pally	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Valdemont</i>	M. Jacquelin	Maurice Bénard
<i>Frénu</i>	Billard	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Angelicus</i>	Jean Rauzéna	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Hiaz</i>	Brécourt	[<i>part dropped</i>]
<i>First servant</i>	Lucien Walter	Bellent
<i>Second servant</i>	Dauphin	[<i>part dropped</i>]
<i>Solange</i>	Mmes Germaine Risse	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Oscarine</i>	Catherine Jordan	Suzanne Nivette
<i>Buluxir</i>	M. Geoffroy	<i>Id.</i>
<i>Ignacette</i>	Renée d'Yd	Ketty Pierson
<i>The collection-taker</i>	Maziehl	<i>Id.</i>

During one of the performances, Roussel decided to leave with Charlotte Dufrène; he could no longer bear the protests. He later wrote: "The play was not understood; and, with a few exceptions, the press articles were ghastly." Here is a selection. (Bearing in mind the fact that, on the same day, most of the critics — the "serious" ones, of course — were at the *Comédie Française*, we cannot help thinking that things could easily have been worse.)

* A "witty" article (*Aux Écoutes*, 14 February 1926) even announced: "We shall soon go to see a play by him (written in collaboration with M. Mouézy-Eon) which will bring the house down at the Châtelet."

The chosen subject is quite pitifully dull; and the only striking point about the development of the subject is its platitude. (Jean Prudhomme, *Le Matin*, 5 February 1926)

A simple Châtelet play,* with a well conducted plot, one of those eternal themes of

adventure plays: the search for missing treasure. (Étienne Rey, *Comœdia*, 3 February 1926)

It is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug*. But it seems to have been conceived and written by a child — by a child with its primary school certificate. (Jacques Boulanger, *Le Nouveau Siècle*, 4 February 1926)

So that nobody can accuse him of having an incoherent play performed, he has tied the stories together with an extremely subtle thread. (Henry Bidou, *Le Journal des Débats*, 8 February 1926)

We are getting warmer. With Henry Bidou (whom Roussel included in his booklet of quotations of 1927) things are starting to become serious. After recalling the interlocking anecdotes in *L'Étoile au Front*, he went on:

This year, by composing [*La Poussière de Soleils*], M. Roussel has once again brought together a mass of ingenious, pungent or moving stories... These tales are varied and surprising and, like the Arabs of Marrakesh, we start to enjoy listening to a storyteller.

Paul Reboux maintained his belief that Roussel was a misunderstood genius: "His style, which I have already discussed several times, is of a rare exactitude and precision."[†] Coming from the man who parodied *L'Étoile au Front*, does this sound like somebody poking fun?

But the most enthusiastic was Louis Laloy in *L'Ère Nouvelle* of 4 February. Raymond Roussel should have quoted him more extensively in his booklet of 1927:

An adventure novel, but at a state of chemical purity, freed from all those deceptive tricks of material exactness, or the vain details of social custom which ordinary authors deem it necessary to add. All through the play, there is nothing except precise dialogue, which the various situations demand and which seems to arise spontaneously: "This bird's skeleton obviously refers to a stone imprinted with a fossil bird, called a Pterodactyl" "Then off we go to the Pterodactyl Stone!" It is precisely this rigorous paring down which creates the style and which forms, instead of a pastiche, a work of art. Imagine the procedure of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, the same scrupulous selection of complete banality, but in a dramatic and not comic work. This is, in my opinion, what M. Roussel aimed to achieve, and he has completely succeeded, the result being a series of highly coloured tableaux, in which each character has been reduced to a gesture, like old-time picture stories when the storyteller's wand descended in front of the crowd. But here, the naïveté is faultless because it is premeditated.

And he concluded:

The interest of this show never flags, and the stylistic approach has been pushed to a degree that demonstrates a rare mastery.

As for André Breton in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, he deduced from these series of tableaux that "Raymond Roussel is a Surrealist of the anecdote", which it must be said is fairly meaningless.

Otherwise, *Aux Écoutes* decided on 14 February that "M. Raymond Roussel's

[†] Booklet of quotations, 1927.

latest play has been a great disappointment, for it is extremely well-behaved, almost comprehensible and not particularly bizarre. During the interval, the Surrealists, Cubists and Dadaists, who had come in the hope of a free-for-all, could not conceal how let down they felt". This was confirmed by André Breton in *Fronton-Virage*:

Over twenty years ago now, I can clearly remember Aragon and I, one afternoon, attending side by side a performance of *La Poussière de Soleils* and, when we had left the Théâtre de la Renaissance,* going towards the Porte-Saint-Denis while animatedly exchanging our impressions. What we had no difficulty in agreeing upon was the terribly languid nature of the plot, which Roussel had apparently wanted to highlight by splashing out more than ever on the sets. From this point of view, the play itself was certainly inferior to *Locus Solus* and *L'Étoile au Front*, neither of which could easily be defended in normal theatrical terms. The absurd way in which the speeches were exchanged, as though the random cut-up of a purely anecdotic text had alone decided the distribution of the voices, had made us "lose the thread" almost as rapidly as the other spectators. Of course, this was not going to make us abandon the admiration and trust we had given to Roussel long before, but this time we had to admit, to our own great disappointment, that a greater disproportion between the *seen* and the mentally *acquired* had left us even less gasping for breath than a music hall would have done.

This reading leaves us as "gasping for breath" as André Breton, though he tried to make amends in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*: "The greatest arbitrariness introduced into a literary subject, in order to dissipate it, to make it vanish by means of a series of sleights-of-hand in which the rational constantly limits and tempers the irrational." To which Annie Le Brun has replied: "In Roussel, the rational does not at all limit or temper the irrational; on the contrary, it exults in it by logically demonstrating its arbitrary beginning and end".

Robert Desnos had already written† concerning *Locus Solus*: "My impression is that we are here faced with a work opposed to *Maldoror*, *Les Illuminations* or *Les Champs magnétiques*. Is not the will which seems to have caused its existence merely an apparent one, and is it not rather a question of cerebral patience?" Which is extremely perceptive. Philippe Soupault, who was flattered to have received a letter from Roussel from Tahiti in 1920, was even more restrained — and verged on the ironic: "Despite its appearances, this poetry is more hermetic and difficult to approach than that of Mallarmé. Many find it boring; it is simply luxurious. One needs to know the leisure and charm of having nothing to do with one's ten fingers."‡

Henri Béhar observed: "The Surrealists defended Roussel and helped to assure his literary survival because he filled the horizon of their expectations. Reciprocally, Roussel more or less accompanied them on the paths of the imagination, the marvellous and the renewal of language. Thus was the chain of Roussel-worship forged from an initial misunderstanding."

Michel Leiris would then remark in the notebook he had been keeping on Roussel for the previous thirty years:

* André Breton was mistaken if he thought these were his first impressions; the press confirms that he attended the première, at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin in 1926; it was the 1927 revival which took place at the Renaissance, and he had thus had the chance to read the published play in the mean time.

† *Paris-Journal*, 8 February 1924, collected in *Nouvelles Hébrides et autres textes, 1922-1930*, Gallimard, 1978.

‡ Philippe Soupault, "Raymond Roussel", *Littérature*, new series, no. 2, 1 April 1922.

I had [...] two ideas to combine: a lover weeping for his dead mistress and a raven continually repeating the word “Nevermore” (Poe).

Difference with Roussel: Poe arrives (or claims to arrive) at these elements by logical deduction — a series of aesthetic considerations; Roussel arrives through puns, a richer means because it is more random.

In Roussel, the technique reveals what it is in addition, that is to say a means of inspiration (as he quite rightly observed concerning rhymes) and not an aesthetic canon. It is at the very antipodes of automatic writing, because it is not by abolishing all the rules that we can make the subconscious emerge but, on the contrary, by actually multiplying these rules, which are all the more efficacious when they bring into play a stronger constraint and the possibilities are more limited. One could of course object that these puns occurred spontaneously to Roussel and it was above all at such moments that the subconscious had its say; nevertheless, the work begins only *beyond* the pun and entirely consists of the logical solution to the problem which the pun has posed.

But, if we can believe *Aux Écoutes* (7 February 1926), his “friends” still remained faithful:

Is Monsieur Raymond Roussel mad?

His friends claim he is not.

On the day before his dress rehearsals, they run round the newspapers and, yanking at the critics’ buttons, yell:

“Just don’t say that Roussel’s mad... He’s no madder than you or I!... The only thing is...”

And then they start talking:

“Each night, M. Raymond Roussel has dreams or, if you want, nightmares. But, unlike other people, he has forgotten nothing of his dreams when he wakes up. He just has to call for his typist and dictate what he can remember.”

Pray for her!

It is not at all impossible that this idea of a “dream procedure” could have occurred to a Surrealist — and why not to Robert Desnos? And wasn’t Roussel disappointed when he found out that even they had not understood his new play?

Marius-François Gaillard’s music fared no better. Jane Catulle-Mendès (*La Presse*, 5 February) wrote:

La Poussière de Soleils was listened to with strict boredom, occasionally shaken up by the provocations from M. Marius-François Gaillard’s orchestra; he is an expert sound-effects man for unexpected screeches and hummings, like the carryings-on in some dive, and he could perhaps, if he so desired, write music.

Nozière noted, in *L’Avenir* of 4 February:

This composer with such disconcerting skill has abandoned himself to the cruellest fancies. His work is totally burlesque, like certain pieces by Claude Debussy.

Étienne Rey observed, in *Comœdia* on the 3rd:

M. M.-F. Gaillard's music wavers, quite pleasantly, between the fun-fair and some minor exotic research.

Gaston de Pawlowski added, in *Le Journal* of 3 February:

Never has a paler serial novel rolled out its meanderings for twenty-one increasingly dreary tableaux, separated by the unexpected musical fantasies of an orchestra which tirelessly tuned its instruments, each playing his own tune.

Only Louis Laloy, once again, in *L'Ère Nouvelle* on 4 February, seemed to have listened to both the play and the music:

I knew this young musician only as an excellent pianist and fine performer of modern music, in particular Debussy. I did not know that he was so skilled in marrying the oboe with the trumpet, and the clarinet with the bassoon, nor that he could maintain a distinct melodic line with a dissident accompaniment, which heads off into another tonality and produces as if by chance such quivering and penetrating dissonances. I know that this contrasted approach has its initial and perhaps inimitable models in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and *Noces*. But an artist must proceed from a tradition; and this is the best one, at least for M. Gaillard, who skilfully derives the most charming effects from it; this is the language which, for the moment, suits his thinking, and his thinking is that of an excellent musician.

It must not of course be forgotten that Raymond Roussel was a musician himself, and that the people he worked with in this field were not picked at random. His relationship to music, either in his own works, or as accompaniment, has not yet been properly studied or researched, except by Lanie Goodman and Patrick Besnier, and there are surely many surprises in store for Roussel's enthusiasts in this domain.

Only the staging of *La Poussière de Soleils* seems to have impressed the critics. Thanks to a letter to Robert Desnos, we know that "timing" had forced Roussel to make some cuts in his play, the published text of which is certainly longer than the version that was performed: Pawlowski's article in *Le Journal* refers to twenty-one tableaux, and not twenty-four.

Roussel had worked into this succession of tableaux an accelerating rhythm, which reading cannot fully recreate. "To our surprise, he found only one solution: to cut each tableau and drop the curtain before it was finished." (Étienne Rey, *Comœdia*, 3 February). "The short scenes are cut up like *images d'Épinal*. The curtain falls before the scenes are finished, and does not rise again before the orchestra has emitted a few false notes mixed with varied noises." (Jean Prudhomme, *Le Matin*, 5 February). *Le Plaisir de Vivre* (later used in the booklet of quotations of 1927) was more fair:

And this is where Raymond Roussel may well be a true innovator. For this sort of ultra-brief tableaux, *reduced to the essential*, has never been used with such audacious tranquillity (except

perhaps by Shakespeare). We are certainly disconcerted, but this is always the case when our habits are brutally disturbed. Why must acts always last three-quarters of an hour, and tableaux twenty minutes? Raymond Roussel thinks that a set which captures an instant, and ten sentences in that set, are enough to mark out a step in the tale. Each time the falling canvas takes our breath away, but the mind is held in that state of tension which is called concentration...

It was of course the scene-shifters who were congratulated. Georges Pioch in *La Volonté* of 4 February:

As regards [*La Poussière de Soleils*], I shall limit myself to my utterly sincere praise for the sets, which are extraordinarily beautiful; the scene-shifters performed the changes with a rapidity that is *unique* to Paris.

Pawlowski, *Le Journal*, on 3 February:

Only the scene-shifters deserve our complete admiration, for they carried out twenty changes of pleasant and quite complicated sets with an exemplary rapidity.

There had to be a good explanation for this, and two columnists quickly came up with one. *Le Cri de Paris*, on 7 February:

This little farce cost a fortune. One example: at the full dress-rehearsal, M. Roussel promised the scene-shifters a large wage rise for each second they could save on the time fixed for changing the sets. Inspired by this promise, by the end of the first Act the scene-shifters had already earned five thousand francs over the sum they were due to be paid.

Comœdia had the same, on 4 February:

Bonuses. — The rapidity of the numerous set-changes during the performances of [*La Poussière de Soleils*] has frequently been remarked upon.

Here is the explanation for the scene-shifters' determination to minimise the intervals.

A certain number of minutes had been set aside for each set-change. In order to galvanise the efforts of the scene-shifters, M. Raymond Roussel promised them a bonus of two francs per *second* gained over the planned timing.

It seems that the Porte-Saint-Martin team has already earned five thousand francs.

These sets were generally received favourably. The critic on *Lc Plaisir de Vivre* emphasised the harmony between them, the music and the staging:

And we suppose that Raymond Roussel must have known what he was doing when we consider the remarkable sets which he ordered from Numa and Chazot: they are not schematic, but simplified, highly coloured in the Russian style with violent contrasts juxtaposed, and a few rudimentary structures, though rarely more than two per scene. We were surprised on several occasions and applauded.

Gabriel Reuillard remarked, in *Paris-Soir* on 4 February:

Very attractive sets by Numa and Chazot which resemble highly-coloured naïve pictures.

Seventeen of them have come down to us, reproduced by Roussel in colour to illustrate his book. What extravagance for a run of just three days!

Shortly after the première, Raymond Roussel sent a card to Robert Desnos:

I am infinitely touched, my dear *confrère*. Once again, a journalist has repeated your famous riposte during *L'Étoile au Front*. I am now anxious to know what your impressions will be after reading *La Poussière de Soleils*, without the cuts that timing forced me to make at the theatre. (The play is currently being published in *L'Illustration*.)

Your ever-thankful,

Raymond Roussel.

La Poussière de Soleils was not in fact published in *L'Illustration théâtrale*, but it was once again *Comœdia* that serialised it from 10 to 29 May 1926, with the following introduction:

Our New Serial:

After the première of *La Poussière de Soleils*, M. Paul Reboux wrote: "When Alphonse Daudet staged *L'Arlésienne*, the public scorned a work which has now become illustrious. When Bizet staged *Carmen* and Gounod *Faust*, the audience was dismissive and the journalists devoid of any pity. Such great examples may be cited with regard to M. Raymond Roussel. It is, in fact, impossible to think of anything that could be applied in normal measure when it comes to the author of *Locus Solus* and *Impressions d'Afrique...*" Since *La Poussière de Soleils* will soon be revived, we have decided to publish it here unabridged. Our readers will thus be able to enjoy its twenty-four tableaux to the full, in which can be found all the talent of its author, whom M. Fernand Gregh described as having "had the capability of twenty novelists and the material for a hundred novels".

While reading the serialisation in *Comœdia*, Michel Leiris wrote to Roussel on 13 May to express his delight: "The language is as ever (even more so, perhaps!) unbelievably pure and white." Roussel answered at once:

My dear Michel,

What a marvellous letter from you! Its style is "white and pure" as well! I shall telephone you in a few days' time to make an appointment with you *viva voce*.

Thank you once again with all my heart, affectionately,

Raymond Roussel.

The cost of staging *La Poussière de Soleils* did not reduce Roussel's habitual spending. In May 1926, he contributed 500 francs to a collection "for Eugénie Buffet", the popular singer who, after busking in the streets dressed as "a harlot", had hit extremely hard times. (Roussel must often have been called on for hand-outs; there are a few traces of this among his papers, such as the 100 francs he paid on 16 June 1928 to the French National Association of Health Visitors!)

MAX ERNST'S CHINESE NIGHTINGALE

Yet, following Michel Leiris's advice, Roussel also frequented art galleries:

Saturday.

My dear Michel,

Would you care to come to Neuilly, for example next Saturday, 5 June [1926], at about 5.30? I should be delighted to have a chat with you.

Affectionately as ever,

Raymond Roussel.

It was doubtless during one such conversation that Michel Leiris recommended that Roussel visit Max Ernst's first major exhibition, which took place in the spring of 1926 at the Galerie Van Leer, 41, Rue de Seine: forty-eight paintings, including *The Flower of the Desert*, *Le Grand Amoureux*, a few *Forests*, several *Earthquakes*, *Suns* and *Seas*, as well as other works using the collage technique. One afternoon, when Max Ernst was alone in the gallery, he became intrigued by the curiosity with which one visitor was examining the pictures. Apologising for his indiscretion, the visitor then asked if the artist used any particular techniques, and would he explain his "procedure". Then Roussel, who had mistaken the painter for a gallery employee, summoned the secretary and purchased *The Chinese Nightingale*, painted in 1920. It was only after his departure that Max Ernst learnt the name of the buyer.*

At the same period, on 8 June, the Imprimerie Lemerre finished printing *La Poussière de Soleils*, though it was officially copyrighted only on 21 March 1927, and advertised from 18 March to 21 April. The cover, printed in blue and red on cream paper, differs from Roussel's other books, which were black on yellow paper. The book has only 248 pages, but it is as thick as the others, thanks to its heavy "alfa" paper. It is probably also the most expensive, since it is illustrated by seventeen colour plates on coated paper, which reproduce the layouts of the sets.† As ever concerned about the timing of the publication of his works, Roussel did not send out copies until the beginning of the following year, when the play was revived.

At the beginning of summer, he lodged an envelope containing four typed pages (an incomplete fragment of the second canto of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* — the first line corresponds to the fifth on page 117 of the first edition: "a grilled sentry-box") with Pierre Leiris, just as he used to do with his father:

Would M. Pierre Leiris be so good as to deposit this envelope in his office safe. 1 July 1926.

Raymond Roussel.

When we knew only about the envelopes deposited with Michel Leiris's father,

* Max Ernst: "Notes pour une biographie", *Écritures*, Gallimard, 1970. *Die chinesische Nachtigall*, or *Chinese Nightingale*, is reproduced as a full-page illustration in *Max Ernst, œuvres de 1919 à 1936*, Éditions Cahiers d'Art, Paris, 1937. But it now seems to have vanished for good; at the Max Ernst exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1991-2, a photographic blow-up of this collage was exhibited as number 41. (Regarding this technique, see Aragon, *La Peinture au défi*, 1930, and Max Ernst, *Écritures*.)

† Roussel's obsession with misprints is well known. In a letter from Monte Carlo, dated 20 January 1927, Georges Féodoroff pointed out to Roussel that on page 114 there was an *s* missing (*urplombe* instead of *surplombe*). This misprint is not found in all copies, and it may be that there were two print runs and that it was "corrected" in the second. But it is also quite likely that this letter *s*, a movable character placed at the beginning of the line, got broken during the run; thus it would not be the last copies which were free of this misprint, but the first.

then his brother, we wondered why Raymond Roussel seemed to trust his stockbroker (and his office safe!) more than any of his friends. There were also questions as to why he abandoned them there: was it pure negligence? Since then, other empty or full envelopes have been found among Roussel's personal papers which show that they had been provisionally lodged with other people, then taken back. It is one of the little mysteries about his writing methods: did he want temporarily to "forget" what he had written, while drafting a second version?

A TRIP TO ROME IN THE MOTORISED CARAVAN

That year, Roussel set off once more in his motorised caravan "according to [his] itinerant whims in search of constantly changing impressions", as the columnist put it in the August issue of the *Revue du Touring-Club*. We know the route he took, thanks to an article in *Le Matin* of 13 December:

A strange caravan outing. — Paris-Rome then back via Switzerland and Mont Cenis without once leaving his own residence, such is the strange record that M. Raymond Roussel has just achieved in his motorised caravan, which contains an entire luxury flat including bathroom. On the way, the caravan was visited by Sultan Moulay Youssef in Chamonix, by the late Princess Laetitia Bonaparte at the Château de Moncalieri and in Rome by Mr. Mussolini, who attentively examined each detail. M. Raymond Roussel was personally received by the Pope, who was also interested in this novel form of tourism. As you can see, the great poet of *Locus Solus* is no less an innovator in the world of reality than in the world of dreams.

When Roger Vitrac expressed his astonishment at how this caravan made Roussel feel isolated from the world, Roussel replied: "Mussolini, whom I saw in Rome, said the same thing. I answered that he had no need of such a vehicle to attract a crowd. Oh, and the Pope also wanted to see my car. But, since he cannot leave the Vatican and since decently — though I wonder why? — they could not take my caravan inside, he sent the Nuncio, who went away enraptured."

[Postcard: Assisi. "*Il crucifisso que parlò a S. Francesco in S. Damiano; Monastero di S. Chiara.*"]

My little Charlotte,

I am pleased that the Grande Grille suits you and that your 'flu was soon over. Voronof's idea is highly amusing! [?] I shall try to eat some Strachino [*sic*: "stracchino", a cheese from the Milan region]. If you were cold in Vichy, I was hot in Rome. Mussolini paid a long visit to my caravan; he is extremely simple and pleasant. I also had an audience with the Pope, and showed him some photos of my caravan, which he kept (Mussolini too, which means I have no more). Assisi was crowded with pilgrims and only one room was free; thus the caravan was particularly useful. It's possible to see the crucifix which spoke to Saint Francis (the one in the background). Michel [Ney] has been made a sergeant.

A thousand tender thoughts.

Raymond.

Michel Leiris noted in his *Journal* (15 August 1961) that, while Roussel was alive, Charlotte Dufrène took the waters at Vichy every year. But he also remarked that if Roussel never took her to the Côte d'Azur "so as to keep intact the memory of the happy moments he had spent there with his mother", Charlotte went there alone whenever she needed "a little cure of *trente-et-quarante*, roulette and *chemin de fer*", for she was a keen gambler.

As for Mussolini, after their meeting, Roussel started sending him copies of his books on Japanese vellum. *La Poussière de Soleils*:

to Monsieur Mussolini, the modern-day Caesar, with deeply respectful compliments (it was I who had the honour of being received last August...).

With *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, Roussel's sycophancy plumbed new depths:

to His Excellence
Monsieur Mussolini
to the greatest man of the age
respectfully presented by
Raymond Roussel
20, Rue Quentin-Bauchart, Paris.*

To mark his journey through Austria, he sent an enormous box of chocolates from Vienna to Mme Loti-Viaud, the young wife of Pierre Loti's son Samuel, which she was never to forget.

Roussel was starting to get fed up with his caravan. It may have helped him to avoid the unpleasantness of hotel service, but it was increasingly attracting people's curiosity. His caravan did not only interest Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. Since he had a phobia of tunnels and never travelled by car at night, each time Roussel stopped in a town or village, a crowd of onlookers formed, some of whom even tried to see through the windows into the interior. Finally, the municipal authorities forbade Roussel to park wherever he wanted, and forced him to park on land set aside for travellers... To have some peace and quiet, he sometimes hired a garage and spent the night there in his caravan!

As soon as he returned to Neuilly, he gave it to his garage keeper and, after informing his family and friends that they could still come and see it, told him to sell it; a chauffeur was permanently employed to show it to visitors. Since then, apparently nobody knows what has become of it. It is said that it was later used in a film, but investigations have until now drawn a blank.

* At the time, in 1932, Roussel had sold his property in Neuilly and was living with his sister. On 16 January 1933, the Italian ambassador to France thanked him for his gift on behalf of Italy's head of state.

THE UNINTERRUPTED MEAL

It was in October 1926 that the young André Guillot* entered Roussel's service as second-cook. He was eighteen and stayed in Neuilly for just six months, until March/April 1927. At about the same time, on 10 November, Raymond Roussel was finally freed from military service.

The most ridiculous things have been said about Roussel and his eating habits. It is true that his letters to Charlotte Dufrène reveal an obvious culinary interest in each of the countries he visited: kangaroo soup in Melbourne, stracchino in Assisi or caviar by the Caspian Sea. Michel Leiris noted that, according to Charlotte Dufrène, the idea of eating disturbed his "serenity" so that, for a certain period, he would fast for several days then compensate by spending four hours at his dinner table, or else at Rumpelmayer's (the *Salon de Thé* at 226, Rue de Rivoli), where he would eat a large number of cakes (which confirms the taste he had for children's food, such as marshmallows, milk, panada and *racahout*). Among Roussel's papers has been found a list of *petits fours glacés* from Rebatet, a confectioner at 72, Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, but it seems that he was chiefly interested in the specific name of each dainty. When his mother died, he got it into his head that he would eat only ham and pasta, while drinking only water and occasionally beer. If ever he went to a restaurant, he would simply order caviar or cheese, with no concern for the order of the dishes, or else would fall back on the same dinner as the one his neighbours were eating. It must also be remembered that in July 1918 his doctors Jean-Charles Roux and Pierre Janet mentioned treating him for a dietary disorder.†

And yet, Mme Frondaie remembered that when her husband was invited to dine at Boulevard Richard-Wallace, there were so many different dishes that he had the impression that Raymond Roussel could eat *à la carte* in his own house.

So should we trust André Guillot's memory? He told his story about Raymond Roussel's "meal" so many times that he had started to embroider it to suit his various customers. He told some of them that Roussel's chauffeurs drove Rolls-Royces, because the initials "RR" were the same as his own. (But he did not know that Roussel chose Lacoste bodywork on a Saurer chassis for his caravan.) However, Guillot's information, no matter how unreliable, remains extremely interesting, as it gives us a glimpse of the lifestyle of upper-middle class families before the economic crisis that ruined them.

The kitchen in the villa's basement was lorded over by a rather taciturn cook, Monsieur Henri (Précopé?), who had also served Raymond Roussel's mother. Like all the other domestics, he followed a strict code of silence:

Let us not forget that a careless word
Through thin walls and through doorways can be heard.

* André Guillot (1908-1993), one of the last great upper-middle class family chefs, moved to the Auberge du Vieux-Marly in 1952, where he often spoke of his early career to his regular customers. He published his memoirs in *La Grande Cuisine bourgeoise*, Flammarion, 1976. (He also wrote *La Vraie Cuisine légère*, 1981.)

† But there were some gourmets and big eaters among Roussel's family and friends. It is said that, in 1909, Prince Murat and his brother-in-law Napoléon Ney, Prince de la Moskowa (and elder brother of Charles Ney, Raymond Roussel's brother-in-law), came back extremely late from a hunt in the forest of Chantilly and went to Maxim's to dine. That evening, all the chef had left were some sole, potatoes and artichoke hearts, which he cut up and fried in a pan: hence the origin of *Soles Murat*.

The housekeeper, Miss MacLelan, was already old and in charge of a staff that consisted of Monsieur Philippe the valet, three cooks, three gardeners, three chauffeurs (three cars were kept in the garages, apparently including Madame Roussel's vehicle), a butler, two footmen and a linen maid. All of them lived in the servants' quarters, often with their wives and children.

"Everything new disturbs me," Roussel told Dr Janet. According to Charlotte Dufrène, he used to repeat an action because, having once performed it, a precedent had been created which meant that it had to become a habit. Dr Janet remarked: "He doesn't want anything to change in the world, he is furious to see that fashions change, that local colour is modified. For a long time, he refused to do anything if it seemed at all new, because he wanted there to be an established precedent for everything." But things were not that simple: we know that he would not at any price go back to the places where he had spent his summer holidays as a child, so as not to spoil his memories. When he finally decided to go back to the Trianon-Lyrique, which he had not visited since his childhood, he asked Charlotte Dufrène to go two or three times and bring him back a programme — before nervously plucking up the courage to accompany her.

As his mother had established the organisation of meals once and for all, Raymond Roussel made a point of continuing, without the slightest change. However, since he often got up late, after working all night, and as he wanted to have his evenings free in order to go to the theatre, the number of meals no longer suited him. He thus adopted a solution which combined his respect for traditions and his need for freedom: he would have all four of his meals, breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner, served one after the other without a break.

The menus were kept by the housekeeper, and his chef very rarely met the master of the house. Isolated in the basement, the kitchen was connected to the ground floor by means of a dumb-waiter.

If André Guillot is to be believed, this "meal" always took place between 12.30 and 5.30 precisely. Each morning, at about ten o'clock, one of the chauffeurs went to collect fresh fruit which had been picked that day in the south of France [?]. For Roussel always began his breakfast with some fruit. Next came a bowl of tea, coffee or hot chocolate (especially imported from Switzerland) with some small *brioques*. The hot chocolate ritual demanded a series of operations in the kitchen, punctuated by the butler's bell, so that the silver bowl would arrive at exactly the right temperature in the dumb-waiter. Roussel finished his breakfast with some Neuchâtel *bondon* cheese. It was then 12.45. Without a break, lunch would then begin with some seafood (oysters or clams), or a fish entrée, followed by a pasta dish; then some small hot entrées (meat, poultry or game — for example, two quails stuffed with *foie gras* wrapped in vine leaves, with carefully seeded grapes). Finally, after a large fish course (salmon steak or roast sturgeon), Raymond Roussel ate a

Champagne sorbet. The remove was a dish with sauce, often quite simple (a Bourguignon, for example), followed by a roast (leg of lamb) or game (roast pheasant or partridge). After a salad (such as a Francillon salad, with mussels and truffles), the master of the house consumed three sweets: some pâtisserie, a cream dessert and an ice, all invariably sprinkled with warm sugar. If the sugar on the ice-cream was not sufficiently warm, it was immediately sent back to the kitchen.

Raymond Roussel sometimes ordered set pieces. For example, one day he was served a set piece in sugar depicting the Tunisian Order of Nichan-Iftikhar (a silver medal with alternate red and green enamel points, a green ribbon with two red fringes on each side), which he had received probably in 1926, at least with the rank of Chevalier; he had first been recommended by France's Resident General and then, like everyone else, paid the chancellery fees, which were a regular part of the Bey's income.

Without a break, the "dinner" part of the meal could now begin. First, two soups: a clear soup garnished with sliced vegetables, which must not betray the slightest sign of having been cut (Roussel would not tolerate vegetables that looked peeled, they had to appear "polished"), and a thick soup. After a fish entrée, a hot entrée with garnishing (omelette, kidneys, or brains), a cold dish (often some *foie gras* that arrived from Biarritz in small sandstone pots), a small salad then, to finish, two or three desserts.

Thus, each of Raymond Roussel's meals was composed of between sixteen and twenty-two dishes. But we should not be surprised at such formality. At the beginning of the century, the Comtesse de Tramar wrote in her *Étiquette mondaine*:

In the past, the slightest dinner consisted of quite a large number of dishes, while ceremonial dinners were substantial. Nowadays, this has been sorted out, and dinners are less exaggerated. We now have a mere four soups, six entrées, several removes and endless roasts.

A simple dinner consists of one soup, one remove, one entrée, a hot roast, a vegetable, a sweet, fruit and *petits fours*.

Semi-ceremonial dinners have one soup, two removes, two entrées, two roasts, one hot and one cold, two vegetables, a sweet or an ice, fruit, dishes of iced fruit, fondants and *petits fours glacés*.

The gala is made up of four soups, two removes, four entrées, iced sorbets, four roasts, poultry, game, salad and *chaud-froid*, aspics, etc. Then come various vegetables, followed by sweets. Finally, the ices, which are always a *bombe* or a large set piece — not served in bowls; these are accompanied by some fine crisp pastries, wafers, etc.

It was then 5.30 precisely, and the master rose from his table. The domestics ate in the kitchen at 6.00. And it was from that basement kitchen that André Guillot, who never saw his master during six months' service, twice managed to glimpse his feet.

Roussel ate alone. He never had guests, not even his sister the Duchesse

d'Elchingen. When the young second-cook asked why, the chef proudly replied: "Because Monsieur does not think anybody else worthy to share the food we prepare for him." Perhaps. But it seems unlikely that the dishes that were returned to the kitchen empty had all been finished by one man, and even less likely that the man in question was Raymond Roussel! His butler and the domestics who served him must have given him a helping hand.

As for the wine, when young Guillot asked a footman what the master drank, he was told: "If you want to know, go and ask the butler yourself."

Despite the instructions to remain silent and secretive, everybody used to gossip a little. It seems that all of the domestics were convinced that their master was a little touched. As for the footmen, they were somewhat effeminate, "as they all are", André Guillot remarked, and in the kitchens there were rumours about their relationships with the master of the house. But there is always tittle-tattle in the kitchens!

This interminable meal did have its advantages: the cooks were free as of six o'clock, which is exceptional. Rather than stay in the dreary atmosphere of Boulevard Richard-Wallace, young Guillot would escape to the nearby Luna-Park where he danced the night away. Sometimes, when he returned in the early hours, at five or six o'clock, he would see a light on in the first-floor study, behind the closed blinds. As he had been advised, the young man took off his shoes and walked over the lawns, for if Roussel heard the slightest crunch of gravel outside while he was working, the person responsible was immediately dismissed. When he heard that his master was soon to have one of his plays performed (the revival of *La Poussière de Soleils*), Guillot was delighted at this chance to go to the theatre. "Don't hold out any hopes," the cook told him. "Monsieur Roussel does not accept any spectators apart from his own guests."

THE REVIVAL OF LA POUSSIÈRE DE SOLEILS

It will be remembered that some of the critics missed the première of *La Poussière de Soleils* because they were otherwise engaged at the Comédie Française. This was presumably one of the reasons why Roussel decided to revive his play, in the same reduced form (of four acts and twenty-one tableaux), for fifteen performances at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. This series of performances was, in Roussel's words, "scarcely any better". The cast was approximately the same; except perhaps when they had other work, practically all of Roussel's actors remained faithful to him.

The première of the revival took place on 12 January 1927. Michel Leiris was in attendance. On 14 January, he wrote Raymond Roussel a long letter:

... If I do often despair of Poetry, I still have the great expedient of re-reading your books, for in them I see that all hope has not been lost. While all those I love and I myself are wasting our time with vain literary artefacts, that universe which you have created will remain, and I think it capable of satisfying all our desires for Poetry, all those desires which cross our bodies like millions of tiny stars with jagged points and which you have managed to melt together into one unique Magnificent and Brilliant Nebula.

My salutations to you, the Prophet, the Creator of times to come...

Roussel replied at once:

My dear Michel,
Your letter is a magnificent work of art! I was moved by it and I thank you profoundly, also for your card that I found at the Renaissance.
With all my heart.
Raymond Roussel.

On 14 January, in the “*Coulisses*” column, illustrated with a caricature of Roussel by Chenal, *Paris-Midi* spoke of its disappointment:

The play did not seem to cause such a stir as on its *début*, which caused one of M. Roussel’s admirers to rub his hands last night and say:

“Well, well, well! They’re getting used to it!”

But the public insisted on having the scandal it had been promised. “*Poussière de Soleils* caused a riot,” wrote *La Presse* on 20 January:

Yesterday evening, at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, violent protestations were heard in the middle of Act II of [*La*] *Poussière de Soleils*. Several hecklers were thrown out and the performance finished normally after they had been ejected.

“When the curtain fell,” Roussel wrote, “people called out ironically: ‘Author! Author!’”

The Artistic Director of the theatre replied to questions asked by a journalist on *La Presse*: “Every evening [...], there are quite sharp words between those who are for and those who are against the ideas held by M. Roussel [*sic*]... Four-letter words are uttered... Fists are raised, but this is all solved when they leave, because we know how to police our spectators... As for M. Roussel [*sic*], he laughs about the protests he causes.” This perhaps sounded true at the time, but it no longer does now.

We know the box-office takings for this series of performances from 12-23 January 1927: the play made over 15,000 francs — 15,553.85 francs to be exact.

Like Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos immediately thanked Roussel for inviting him:

Paris. Tuesday 9, Rue de Rivoli.

It is with much gratitude that I thank you for the kindness you have shown my friends and me for *Poussière de Soleil* [sic]. I have already told you how much I love your beautiful play and I should like to print it. Let me also tell you, with my ever-lasting admiration, how much my friends and I would like to see your *Impressions d'Afrique* revived. None of us saw it performed. It will return in time to refute your detractors. We can supply you with a hundred partisans who, along with those whom you know in Paris, will defeat your enemies. And allow me to tell you how much we are looking forward to your next play which, I have no doubt, will mark as much of an advance as your previous three works and baffle our pathetic modern theatre.

Your very devoted Robert Desnos.

It was during this revival that Roussel decided to send out copies of *La Poussière de Soleils*, which had been ready for six months and which would be copyrighted on 21 March. On a copy on Japanese vellum:

to Robert Desnos

author of that highly witty riposte quoted below [in the twelve-page booklet of quotations]

His thankful

Raymond Roussel.

January 1927.

A letter accompanied the package:

Sunday.

My dear *confrère*,

You are one of the first to be sent a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils*.

As you know Georges Pioch, tell him that I am extremely sorry my quotation upset him.

In fact, I do not understand how such words have been attributed to him since what he actually said was: "This is no doubt sufficient reason for some new writers to see, etc." In any case, I have added some context in order to take into account his article in *La Volonté*.

Confraternally yours,

Raymond Roussel.

This is an allusion to an article by Georges Pioch in *La Volonté* of 4 February 1926, from which Roussel, as usual, had extracted and published only the flattering parts:

I saw that he was having the newspapers publish, at his own expense, among other extracts no doubt just as cunningly and improperly selected, a sentence from an article in which I had tried to evaluate him and which went like this, I think: "*However, it is enough for certain people to hail him as a new Shakespearc...*" I am quoting from memory; if this is not the exact wording, then the meaning is the same. M. Raymond Roussel, whom I do not personally know, and who no doubt wishes me well, only too well in fact, has reprinted this sentence in the programme of *La Poussière de Soleils*. How kind of him!... But why did he not also reproduce the context?

If he had, then I might not have been surprised this morning to discover, in *Le Journal*, this passage by my old and dear friend G. de Pawlowski, who must have been quoting from memory as well: "... *nor is he a future Shakespeare, as Georges Pioch claims.*"

It is a long way from the *affirmation* which Pawlowski kindly attributes to me to the *honest* observation that I made concerning the enthusiastic, even passionate taste for M. Raymond Roussel's experiments on the part of certain writers, whom I admire for their courage, and esteem for their work, *even though I am distant from them myself* (I mean the Surrealists: MM. André Breton, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, etc. etc.).

In the first programme for *La Poussière de Soleils* at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, Roussel had indeed retained only two lines from Georges Pioch's article; which isn't very much, and some people may have been deceived. In the insert which then accompanied the published play (as in the sixteen-page booklet in subsequent editions) the "context" had been restored:

Is Raymond Roussel mad? Is he possessed by such brilliance that we cannot endure the flame?... Is he a clown? Is he sinister?... Is he all? is he nothing?... This is, no doubt, sufficient reason for some new writers to see in Raymond Roussel a future Shakespeare...

Was Roussel as naïve as he wanted to make Robert Desnos believe when he extracted one or two lines from the least favourable articles in the press? And did Desnos himself understand him correctly? On "31 January 1926" (for "1927"), he thanked him on the headed notepaper of *Le Soir, Tribunc des Gauches*, 1, Rue Mondétour:

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for sending me *Poussière de Soleil* [*sic*]. When I read it, I enjoyed it even more than when I saw it performed, and I hope to announce this in writing for I was not able to talk about it during the dress rehearsal, since there was no forum.

I appreciated the perfect presentation of your book and once again discovered the usual perfect charm and strange poetry of your works. It is less dense than your previous work and, to my mind, shows a desire for renewal and a further incursion into that unknown realm which you alone explore.

As ever, from your admirer and devoted,

Robert Desnos.

And Desnos sent Roussel a copy of *La Liberté ou l'Amour*, with the censored pages enclosed and the following inscription which was presumably supposed to evoke the themes of the Rousselian imagination:

to Raymond Roussel
definitive calculation of the tides
mathematics of constellations
triangulation of destiny's continents
trigonometry of dreams

measure of time
Figure of silence
with compliments

Robert Desnos*

Roussel thanked him with a calling-card:

Infinite thanks, my dear *confrère*. I am always eager to start a new book by you.

An observation which conveniently removed the need for any critical judgement, just like the one he used when Louis Aragon sent him an offprint of *Une Vague de rêves*, which had been published in *Commerce* in 1924:

To Raymond Roussel
perfect statue of genius,
respectfully.

Roussel simply sent him *La Poussière de Soleils* with the following words: "Confraternal thanks for his beautiful inscription in *Une vague de rêves*".†

A certain number of inscriptions in copies of *La Poussière de Soleils* served to thank Roussel's guests for coming to the theatre:

"And each of these millions of suns is the pivot of some universe!"
to Monsieur Jacques Doucet
with the compliments of the author who deeply appreciated his presence at the dress rehearsal of *La Poussière de Soleils*.
January 1927.
Raymond Roussel.‡

"And here we see the totality of these millions of suns in the shape of a cloud of dust!"
to Monsieur Rondel
with the compliments of the author who deeply appreciated his presence at the première of *La Poussière de Soleils*.
January 1927.
Raymond Roussel.§

to Monsieur Paul Imbert
with the compliments of the author who deeply appreciated his presence at the Porte-Saint-Martin.
January 1927.
Raymond Roussel.¶

to Maurice Rostand
with all my friendship and all my admiration.
January 1927.
Raymond Roussel.⌘

to Georges Courteline, with all my fervour.
Raymond Roussel.
June 1927.❖

* Below this inscription is a small pen drawing depicting a boat at sea. This copy belonged to Lucien Biton, who bought it after Roussel's death in a bookshop in Passage Jouffroy, from a bin of books from the Hôtel Drouot. With the exception of his manuscripts and personal papers, part of Roussel's library must have gone the same way. There does not seem to have been an ex-libris which would identify unscripted volumes.

† *Digraphe*, no. 67, February 1994.

‡ Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. It was the last inscription from Roussel to Jacques Doucet, who died on 30 October 1929. The translations from the play in this inscription, and those following, is by Harry Mathews

§ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Rondel archives, RF 71.829.

¶ Catalogue Cécile Éluard, no. 2, December 1980; catalogue Pierre and Michel Dreyfus, no. 1, December 1984.

⌘ Bibliothèque Jacques Matarasso, Drouot sale, 28 April 1994.

❖ Catalogue Coulet-Faure, no. 75, May 1985; catalogue *Éd. Originales contemporaines*, no. 283, Drouot, 29 March 1995.

It is probably at this time — March 1927 — that Roussel started seeing Dr Janet again. If we can believe the book inscription, it was the doctor rather than the patient who did most of the talking. From what he wrote, Roussel had already read his previous works, but did he know that, in August of the following year, he would appear in the pages of *De l'Angoisse à l'extase*, just before he went to the clinic at Saint-Cloud?

To Dr Pierre Janet to whom I do an injustice by not always keeping a stenographer at his heels. With all the admiration of his reader and listener. Raymond Roussel. March 1927.

Other copies on Japanese vellum went to Lugné-Poe, Philippe Soupault, Henri Bergson (“... to the modern-day Descartes”*) and to Cadet de Gassicourt:†

“... a vast cloud of dust, made up of millions of specks, with each speck being perhaps a sun at the centre of a swirling complex of worlds!”

to Monsieur de Gassicourt, with the compliments of the author who deeply appreciated his presence at the Porte-Saint-Martin.

January 1927.

Raymond Roussel.

Gassicourt included a card, bearing Roussel's address, in his copy, and another on which he had noted the “thread” of the plot of *La Poussière de Soleils*, just as Jean Ferry would later note:

Ambrosi's skull — sonnet engraved on the skull — marked letters: S.E.P.I.A. — a *sepia* drawing depicting the *pterodactyl* stone — raffle of the missal — the *martin* or *swallow of stone* — paper under a stuffed *swallow's* wing with a quotation from Honoré d'Urfé's *Astrée* — visit to owner of d'Urfé's letters and discovery in them of the words: *shepherdess* and *albino* — Visit to Ignacette, the *albino shepherdess*, who had received from Guillaume Blache a prayer to obtain a *sunshower* — Visit to museum to see the painting *The Sunshower*, and a sketch of it bearing a sentence from a book which, once found in Library, contains a note concerning Dr Flurian's Humour Zones — caricature of a speech by *Dr Flurian* containing a *golden lily* — *The Golden Lily*, on the flag of the Turzilo-Selirdian Republic and the Okleat stamp with a sun and *asterisks* — the 3 *stars* on the cross marking François Patrier's fatal accident and the gift of 125 francs, or 5 *cubed* — a game of *cubes* and the upturned cube with a Phrygian cap and a tricolour *rosette* — The *rosette* of the Eve-ites with the letters L.P., which could stand for Libertarian Principles or Louis-Philippe — the Café Frénu, set up under *Louis-Philippe* and the manuscript telling the story of the gnome Jab, whose basket contained just one *strawberry* — The *strawberry* birthmark on Achille Magès's cheek, who was killed by a jealous husband and thrown into a *shaft of the Estyne caves* — Exploration of *shaft* and discovery of the jewels.

* Catalogue J. Vrin, no. 562, June 1977.

† Pascal Pia's library.

‡ Roussel noted the name of M. Martin, the director of the reading room.

It was certainly Cadet de Gassicourt who must have persuaded Roussel to stop buying new books and read them at the Bibliothèque Nationale‡ instead. For Roussel was a voracious reader. He apparently missed nothing that came out, or nothing that

just had to be read. In his papers, a good forty envelopes bear the names of fashionable authors, and contain Roussel's critical opinion of their latest books, as well as their shelf-numbers at the BN. Raymond Roussel accumulated notes, summaries and short extracts, with more good intention than critical acumen, on Louis Barthou,* Émile Mâle and Louis Madelin, on the novels of Paul Bourget and Marcel Prévost, not forgetting works by Pétain and Lyautey. While reading Paul Valéry, he needed two attempts to spell Nietzsche correctly. Concerning Louis Bertrand he noted: "At once a lively style, but one is forced to read slowly." Thanks to a "secret" which Charlotte Dufrène confided to Michel Leiris, we know that "he did not like Anatole France". On the other hand, he read a lot of serialised novels and detective stories, such as *Pardaillan* and *Monsieur Lecocq*. What these cards do not reveal is the more secretive reading of "under the counter" books that he must have indulged in. In *La Poussière de Soleils*, Guillaume Blache gives Courneuleux an old enchologion of black masses interspersed with lewd engravings: one of them shows a woman brandishing a whip (or *martinet*) just like the ones in the innumerable books on flagellation published at the time by Massy.

These few inscriptions create the impression that more copies of *La Poussière de Soleils* were sent out to the press than the resulting traces might lead us to believe. As opposed to the ordinary edition, the copies on Japanese vellum known to us had a market value that protected them from ending up on a second-hand bookstall.

It is known that some intimates received all of his books. The following quotation was sent to Juliette Jannet, Michel Leiris's "elder sister", and perhaps refers to a scene she would have remembered from Rue de Chaillot:

"... a glass case full of Dresden china which, at night, in the moonlight, comes to life and converses."

to madame Jannet
with the compliments of a very old friend
January 1927.

Raymond Roussel.

To Suzanne Grimpel:

"Of these millions of suns many are — unquestionably more than our own — huge, hot, fiery, bright and strong."

Affectionately written for my dear Suzanne.

January 1927.

Raymond Roussel.

We cannot help admiring how constantly Roussel used this "procedure" for dedicating his books. He quite simply wrote out "for" the recipient a short passage from his work, which appears chosen at random, but nevertheless reveals certain preferences. It is Jacques's penultimate speech which provides most of the inscriptions

* A letter from Louis Barthou, the Minister of Justice, dated 27 March 1927, thanks Roussel for having sent him his book and invites him to the ministry.

for *La Poussière de Soleils*, with the exception of the one for Mme Jannet.

When he learnt that his niece, Nicole Grimprel, had read the book that he had sent to her mother, Roussel inscribed a copy of *Pages Choisies* to her:

My dear Nicole,

I was deeply touched to hear that you had just read *La Poussière de Soleils*. I am sending you my *Pages Choisies*, which your family does not possess. If you like "three months in Ejur", you will find a description of these festivities in *Impressions d'Afrique* (pages 1 to 211).

My affectionate thoughts to you, Nicole, and to yours.

Raymond.

Raymond Roussel could now do his accounts. On 17 February, after an estimate of 256,000 francs, the real cost was calculated to be 275,060.90 francs. The amount for the "artistes and fees" alone was 124,350 francs. We also know that there were twenty-two scene-shifters and six property-men, whose wages and bonuses stood at 18,480 and 5,265 francs respectively, or 23,745 francs for twenty-eight people.

From 18 March to 21 April, Roussel published extracts of reviews by Abel Hermant, Jean Pellenc and Michel Leiris, covering thirty lines in all, in twenty newspapers to advertise the illustrated edition of *La Poussière de Soleils*. He enclosed them with a letter to Michel Leiris, who had been travelling in Egypt since 11 April:

Thursday [19 or 26 April 1927].

My dear Michel,

I was extremely touched by your affectionate card of the Sphinx. It reminds me of the visit I made to her so long ago now [in 1906].

I thought you might be amused to keep these press cuttings as a souvenir.

Thank you again with all my heart for the wonderful lines you wrote. Affectionately, as ever,

Raymond Roussel.

By mistake *Les Débats* published them twice, on 18 and 31 March.

At about the same time, in March 1927, he sent Pierre Leiris, Michel's brother, a copy of *Impressions d'Afrique*, published seventeen years before, inscribed with a line copied from page 177 and "written for my dear Pierre Leiris with all my old affection."

In June, he wrote the following inscription on a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils*:

to monsieur Clemenceau

to the greatest historical figure of our time

with the compliments of a very respectful friend from Carlsbad

June 1927.

Raymond Roussel.*

But it was only the following month, on 29 July, that he went to Carlsbad that year. He took rooms at the Olympic Palace Hotel, which he left on 4 August absent-

* Alain Borer's library.

mindedly taking his bedroom key with him.

During 1927, Élie Richard, who published a particularly fine article* in *Paris-Midi* on 9 October, met Roussel one evening, probably at Charlotte Dufrène's flat:

... The literary life of the last twenty-five years has passed him by [...] completely. Yet the new schools call him one of their prophets.

In almost complete literary isolation, while frequenting society, doing business [?], "possessing", in fact seeing only those people that *true poetry* never importunes, he has created a world.

It is true that the Rousselian universe knows neither pain nor happiness. It nevertheless lives from an (extra-literary) rhythm that is practically cosmic. It is the recreation of the cosmos by a sort of divinity that distinguishes only movement, to whom human feelings mean so little that he hardly lends ear to them, and who stands alone and in pain in the midst of it all.

For this rich man is not happy. An incurable sadness racks him. He is in desperation at the disdain in which the general public holds his work.

"They say that I am mad!"

These disenchanted words often recur in his conversation. He is saddened by the opinion of people who have never constructed anything. [...]

I think again of what he would give to have the renown of a writer of potboilers. Are not certain divinities like that — and wish they were human?

He's God — and is unaware of the fact.

After reading *Lc Point cardinal*, which Michel Leiris had sent him in June 1927, he answered with a calling-card:

I was strangely captivated, my dear Michel, by this daring stab with a sounding-rod into a sort of other world which is all your own. The high price I already attached to your kindness regarding my books has increased since I read *Lc Point cardinal*. And how touched I was by your beautiful inscription!

Your deeply affectionate *confrère* who will now closely follow your development.

Raymond Roussel.

A TRIP TO THE HOLY LAND AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Raymond Roussel obtained a new passport, valid for one year — except for Russia, Morocco, Syria and the Lebanon, which attracted few tourists at that time.

The description of the bearer is hardly any more explicit than the one made by the army in 1897:

Age	49
Height	one metre, 70
Hair	brown
Forehead	ordinary
Eyebrows	brown
Nose	average

* Reproduced in full in *Bizarre*, nos. 34-5.

Beard	>>
Chin	<i>round</i>
Face	<i>oval</i>
Complexion	<i>fresh</i>

Raymond Roussel then left Paris on another solitary journey to the Middle East. He sent a postcard ("Constantinople. Suleymanieh Mosque, the Western exit") to Michel Leiris, who was then in Greece and had expressed a desire to see him on his travels:

My dear Michel,

I was extremely touched by your kind letter and I should have been delighted to meet you. But I have given up on Greece for this year; I should prefer to benefit from my position in Constantinople to visit Asia Minor.

I wish you a good journey with all my heart and send you a thousand affectionate thoughts.

Raymond Roussel.

Since Roussel used it, let us keep the name Constantinople, instead of Istanbul, and the year 1346 of the Hegira, as the date he used on his postcards.*

In fact, once more following in the footsteps of Pierre Loti, Constantinople was the real objective of this trip. He told of his visit to Aziyadé's tomb, just like Hakidjé's tomb, at the Edirne Kapi cemetery, on a postcard (of the interior of Saint Sophia) to Charlotte Dufrène:

My little Charlotte,

Even though I went to Carlsbad just to visit, I nevertheless took the waters a little, for it seems that they are highly recommended after an attack of furunculosis. Here I am in Constantinople and I have already picked a flower on the tomb of... you know who. I am sending you a view of Saint Sophia. Enjoy the waters [at Carlsbad] and a thousand tender thoughts.

Raymond.



But, as we have pointed out, the passport he had obtained in Paris was not valid for Syria or the Lebanon. It was thus necessary to acquire a travel permit in Turkey, and for this reason Roussel had an identity photograph taken by Oko, a photographer in Pera. With a chauffeur, who drove a convertible, and an interpreter called Armen, he then crossed Lebanon and Syria. He sent his mistress a postcard from Baghdad ("Baghdad. A country road.") on which three heavily laden donkeys can be seen being led by a man in a white tunic and turban alongside a wall of rammed earth, with a scattering of shrubs and palm trees on the other side of the road:

My little Charlotte,

The other day I had a flat tyre in Tyre. I find that rather elegant. From Beirut, I made some excursions into Lebanon, then I was in Damascus where there is some extraordinary

* Year 1346 of the Hegira began on 1 July 1927.

marshmallow ice-cream [and where he had a photo taken of himself at the door of the Emévié mosque with a charming little girl in a veil]. Here I am in Baghdad, the land of the 1001 nights and of Ali Baba, which makes me think of Lecocq [the composer of the operetta *Ali-Baba*]; the people's costumes are more extraordinary than those worn by minor players at the Gaité. My room looks over the Tigris; I have visited the ruins of Babylon.

A thousand tender thoughts.

Raymond.

He had photographs of himself taken in Palestine — alone in the valley of Jehoshaphat, with a Bedouin in front of the Dead Sea, and in Jerusalem in the little dome of the Ascension, standing, with his arms braced against his sides, ready for take-off, “on the stone where Jesus went up to heaven from the Mount of Olives”, as the dragoman wrote in pencil on the back.

Next came Iran. He sent Charlotte Dufrène a postcard depicting a Persian painting (portrait of a man):

Ispahan the 11 Rehi-ul-Ahir of the year 1346 of the Hegira.

My little Charlotte,

How you must have suffered both physically and mentally during those days! Luckily word came to me extremely late and I was able to tell myself that it was ancient history; how right you were to refuse any operation. My return is approaching and I hope to find you in perfect health. On my way to Tehran, I spent a night in Ecbatana, the capital of Darius and Xerxes. I made an excursion to the Caspian Sea, the kingdom of caviar. I had hoped to eat some extra fresh, but it is not yet the season, and what I was given was rather salt. If I was early for the caviar there, here in Ispahan I am late for the roses. Persia is very strange, but very uncomfortable. It is like being in 1346 of the Christian era, and not of the Hegira,

A thousand tender thoughts.

Raymond.

He also sent the same card to Pierre Leiris:

Ispahan the 11 Rehi-ul-Ahir of the year 1346 of the Hegira.

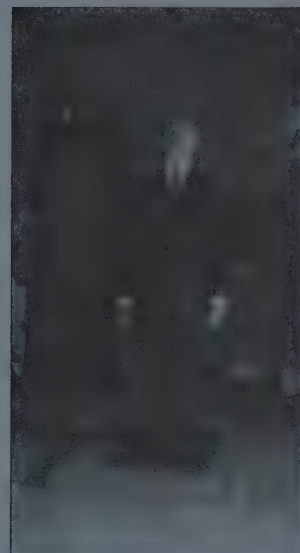
My dear Pierre,

Thank you for your affectionate letters, which I unfortunately received very late. You can send the money to monsieur Féodoroff with an extra thousand francs. Here I am in Ispahan, via Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Ecbatana, the Caspian Sea and Tehran. I shall soon be on my way home.

A thousand affectionate recollections.

Raymond Roussel.

“For some time already,” Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris, “he had become obsessed by the fear of having white hair. A reputed doctor [Dr Sabouraud] advised him to pass a hot-air drier over his hair twice a week, and he applied it to each spot until it burnt, saying that if he missed the treatment once, then he would stop completely, having broken a ‘series’. Sometimes, in places where he could not use



the appliance he had taken with him [in Persia, for example], he replaced it with pre-heated saucepans; once, even, for the lack of a saucepan, he used a metal plate which he had to kneel down beside..."

With Eugène Vallée, the type-setter at the Imprimerie Lemerre, Roussel started estimating how long they each had to live, according to the statistics.* It is thus, as Michel Leiris pointed out, by scientific and rational means that he tried to combat his anxieties.

Physical pain was also a preoccupation. "I heard from my mother," said Michel Leiris, "that, one day, Roussel questioned her for a long time about the sufferings of childbirth, in astonishment that she had had other children when she said that it was so painful. Considering the period and Roussel's habitual reserve, he must have been extremely interested in the subject to have been able to discuss it with a relatively young woman, who was little used to conversing on such matters. He also asked Charlotte Dufrène never to mention in front of him the fear she had of dentists and of snakes, for he was worried that she would give it to him by contagion. He could not bear the sight of tears."

And Roussel, who in his books never referred to his "minor affairs", as Jean Ferry put it, seemed so obsessed by certain illnesses that we cannot help wondering if he was not completely mute at times, and obliged to use a blackboard in order to converse. On two occasions in *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* we encounter a victim of aphonia, who finally becomes accustomed to his "tedious slate for whitening". This was certainly not due to tobacco, for Roussel did not smoke and, in the same poem, he refers to the "stinking breath [...] of the smoker". But this use of a blackboard was just a reminiscence of a problem experienced by someone in his family — perhaps his mother when, in about 1907, she was being treated by Dr Clément.

Roussel feared decay and aging:

'... the holy fire of genius
Goes out when age makes its owner senile.†

But he had managed to convince himself that, one day, science would allow us to travel back in time.

In 1927, he was fifty.

* Eugène Vallée, born in 1862 in Bouloire (Sarthe) and died between 1935 and 1939, was fifteen years older than Roussel. In 1892, he published with Lemerre (which was then at 25, Rue des Grands-Augustins) a genealogical pamphlet entitled: *Filiation Vallée, 1620-1892*.

† *New Impressions of Africa* (completed in 1928).

V
NEW IMPRESSIONS OF
AFRICA
1928-1933



RAYMOND ROUSSEL AT THE ASSIZE COURT

Was "The Montmorency Case" another *Locus Solus*? No, but by a strange coincidence, Raymond Roussel, who had a clean police record, was called to serve on a jury at the Seine Assize Court for the first session of January 1928. As chance would have it, he was the foreman of the jury during the trial of his near namesake Louis Rousselet, who was being tried for murder and attempted murder, after seriously wounding his lover and killing the policeman who had come to arrest him.* Roussel replied in practically the same way to all the journalists who asked him to give his impressions:

This author, who bears his wealth discreetly, is in reality a shy, circumspect man, who knows the value of silence and identifies all the traps the spoken word may contain.

"I sat on a case of great human, social and psychological interest, but you know that we are forbidden to discuss it. All I can tell you is that I experienced a lasting emotion, one of the longest of my life. My heart beat hard during all of the eight-hour session, it beat as hard as it did during the three hours of rehearsals for each of my plays. There, I was the judge; here, I saw people being judged. It was my first time. I was a beginner. And I felt as though I had a great responsibility that simultaneously commanded emotion and demanded a cool head, lucidity, intelligence and reflection. I admired presiding judge Warrain's authority, the clarity of Gazier, the public prosecutor, and the eloquence of Maîtres Campinchi [Louis Rousselet's barrister] and Tinayre. All of them deserve sincere praise. As for the accused, I can say nothing. What we had before us was a criminal who had once been an honest man. (*L'Excelsior*, 12 January 1928)

In the *Journal* of the same day, Géo London remarked that "in private life Raymond Roussel, whose works are obscure, hermetic and impenetrable for common mortals, speaks with a clarity and common sense that MM. Joseph Prudhomme and La Palisse might envy."

"I consider," he told me, "that the workings of a jury are deeply moving and that they require impeccable logic and lucidity from those who participate. As for me, I was more troubled during the eight-hour session than for the three hours that the rehearsals of my plays have always lasted. I could literally feel my heart beating."

Another surprise is that M. Raymond Roussel, whose plays have been so severely criticised, turns out to be the kindest of critics... when it comes to courtrooms. He admired presiding judge Warrain's impartiality, Maître Lucile Tinayre's eloquence, as too Maître Campinchi's as well as that of the public prosecutor Gazier, the honesty of the witnesses and the intelligence of his fellow jurors.† One feels that he is restraining himself from adding

* Roll of the Seine Assize Court, first fortnight of January 1928:

Tuesday 3 January. Demoiselle Thimbre, Yvonne. Infanticide.

Wednesday 4. Widow Pifiard, née Martin. Arson.

Thursday 5. Devay, Louis. Murder.

Friday 6. Demoiselle Lespilaire, Jeanne. Manslaughter.

Saturday 7. Calvet, Cyprien. Aggravated theft.

Monday 9. Rousselet, Louis. Murder and attempted murder.

Tuesday 10. Espagnol, Raymond. Murder, assault and battery.

Wednesday 11. Gay, Edmond; de Mazoyet, Louise, née Schloup; de Mazoyet, Eugène; de Mazoyet, Marie, née Hoyaux. Forgery.

† One of them, M. Drujon of 14, Boulevard de Port-Royal, was sent copies of *Locus Solus* and *Impressions d'Afrique* with a dedicatory letter.

rhapsodically: "And wasn't the murderer a charming fellow!"

M. Raymond Roussel is not going to use his experience as a juror as the basis for a new play.

"I have travelled round the world," he told me. "And I have never used what I remember seeing. I have just travelled to Persia which, from a literary point of view, will be of no use to me. All my works are purely imaginary, Sir."

That is what we all rather thought.

His answer was the same when an *Excelsior* journalist asked him:

"Have you noted down any of your impressions?"

"No. Ten years ago, I travelled round the world, last year I went to Persia and I made no notes at all, I did not write a single line. I shall exploit nothing of this in my works, which are purely imaginary."

THE LÉGION D'HONNEUR

Who was he trying to fool? In the "personal information" file Roussel sent that same month to the Chancellery of the *Légion d'honneur*, under the heading "trips abroad" he mentioned: "Travelled round the world between 1920 and 1921 for literary research." And yet, later that year, he noted that he adored reading André Chevrillon's *Puritains du désert* because "although I have travelled much, I have never written about my travels".

This file (number 143.281), typed in violet ink, was rather late coming. Raymond Roussel was already *Officier d'Académie* (1907), *Officier de l'Instruction publique* (1914), had been decorated with the commemorative medal of the Great War, the Inter-Allies' Victory medal, the Nichan-Iftikhar by 1927, and so on. All he now needed was to be raised to some grade or other of the *Légion d'honneur*, just like Pierre Frondaie, Henri Zo, Paul Bourget, Edmond Rostand, Camille Flammarion, or any of the other artists and writers he frequented. Louis Barthou, an old friend of his mother's, who was then Minister of Justice under Poincaré, personally intervened with Édouard Herriot, the Minister of Education and Culture, and sent him the latter's reply (saying that note had been duly taken on 19 May 1927), signing himself: "yours truly, Louis Barthou".

This new decoration was to be valid as of 14 February, and the award made on 23 March 1928. Under the heading "Total length of civil and military service", an unidentified hand noted "27 years". What was included in this calculation of 1928? Roussel was in the class of '97, his active army service had finished in 1901, and he was freed of any obligation to serve on 10 November 1926. None of these dates corresponds to twenty-seven years' service. When he was finally exempted from service at the end of 1926, just a year and a half earlier, he had accomplished his thirty years of service; if we count only his years of active service, then the figure

drops to five. We must therefore suppose that he considered himself exempt as of 1923, and not 1926.

In support of his application, Raymond Roussel cited all his works published since 1897. And, under the heading "Services rendered to charity organisations, commissions, etc.", he gave the expected answer: "Contributed the sum of fifty thousand francs to the upkeep of the *Légion d'honneur*, and possess a letter of thanks from General [Yvon] Dubail, the Grand Chancellor." There is an explanation for everything.*

Raymond Roussel also sent a copy of his police record ("clean"), the receipt for the fifty francs he had paid to the Chancellery *au titre des frais* [to cover costs], and a copy of his birth certificate dated 27 January. These papers were sent with a covering letter, on unheaded notepaper (he wrote instead "25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, Neuilly-sur-Seine") which is undated (but later than 27 January):

Dear Grand Chancellor,

I have the honour of sending you the enclosed documents.

For my address of welcome, I have chosen Dr [Jean] Baratoux,† *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*, 30, Rue La Boétie, Paris.

Yours faithfully,

Raymond Roussel.

Jean Cocteau (who was later to know what he was talking about) was surely wrong when he wrote: "The Académie, the *Légion d'honneur*, all of those little decorations fascinated him because his pure spirit thought them important and still attributed to them the privileges they must have had originally and which they should never have lost" (*En toute hâte*, 1933).

Under the simple title "Raymond Roussel", Élie Richard wrote another fine piece about him in *Paris-Soir* of 24 January 1928:

How has M. Raymond Roussel, a difficult and misunderstood writer, come to join the *Légion d'honneur*, where normally we see only people of recognised level-headedness? I suppose that he wanted to show that his enigmatic art does not preclude an interest in the life that takes such a small place in his books [...].

Between him and the public, there is a misunderstanding which nothing can dissipate. I fear that a decoration will never bring together two such contrary interpretations of the words "life" and "literature".

Once more, M. Raymond Roussel has attempted to please a mob lacking in poetic sensibility. I hope that he will not be so disenchanted as he was after the performances of *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*.

It seems that this inventor of genius will never understand that fame and glory are not necessarily granted to creators. [...] He has recognised this himself, not by getting himself decorated, but by sensing in advance what public opinion will say.

M. Paul Reboux once said of his art: "Is this not what is termed genius?"

That is the finest decoration of all.

* In 1932, Roussel sent a copy on Japanese vellum of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* to General Dubail "with great respect", which he acknowledged with a calling-card.

† As early as 1925, Dr Baratoux had received a copy on Japanese vellum of *L'Étoile au Front* "given in memory of an extremely old friendship"; then a copy of *La Poussière de Soleils* on Japanese vellum "affectionately yours"; then finally *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (the doctor was then living at 54, Rue de Bassano): "Dear doctor, I enclose with this book the affectionate recollections of an old friend."

But, at this period, Raymond Roussel was finally forced to recognise that he was ruined. He would have to live less extravagantly and sell his property in Neuilly. He had to get rid of his servants.

At first, he decided to live in a hotel. However, when Roussel went to a hotel, it was not to take a room in the first lodging-house he came across, but rather a suite at the Ritz, on Place Vendôme, where he occupied suite 303 in March and April 1928, then suite 124 in May.

Yet he soon had to face facts. Such spending was now beyond his means. His capital had been eaten up more by his books and plays, than by his extravagant lifestyle. He was thus forced to ask his sister to put him up in her town house on Rue Quentin-Bauchart, in the second-floor apartments previously occupied by a couple of Americans, whom Germaine sent away. This was not without some hesitation on her part: "He's mad," she said. "But he is nice". Nonetheless this did not stop her telling other people that she was scared of him and above all feared for her son, Michel... Roussel, however, kept his distance. When going back to his rooms each evening, he greeted his sister, but never ate with her. He paid her 120,000 francs rent (plus water) and, for 26,000 francs, had an entire electric system fitted so that his bed was surrounded by heaters, controlled from a keyboard. One day, while he was out, Germaine suggested that her niece Nicole Grimprel might like to look round the rooms that Raymond had occupied for the previous three months. They came across some enormous Vuitton trunks which were cluttering up the rooms and had not yet been opened. Did he ever unpack them?

AT THE SAINT-CLOUD CLINIC

In any case, the "sensation of glory" which Roussel had experienced in his youth, and which he had continued to seek ever since, is not something that can be given by a medal or an award. It is an emotional high; and he now turned to alcohol, which provided him with moments of great exaltation that sometimes degenerated into fits of anger. His cousin Victor Grimprel and his nephew Michel Ney were extremely surprised when they learnt that he had signed up with the "Anti-Alcohol League".

In 1928, Raymond Roussel, a Chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur*, and juror at the Assize Court, was taking drugs:

Morphine lovers [wonder] among pleasures how well
Epicurus would have loved their needle...*

He was forced to go into a detoxification clinic. From 10 September to 8 October 1928, he stayed in Glion-sur-Montreux† in Switzerland, in the Valmont

* *New Impressions of Africa*.

† Charlotte Dufrène also stayed there, alone, and one Tuesday 20 September (i.e. in 1921, 1927 or even 1932), apologised for having lengthened her absence. She would be at Roussel's "disposal" the following Monday: "I am delighted to be able to say 'see you soon', and send you a thousand tender thoughts."

medical clinic, room 11. On 16 December of the same year, Jean Cocteau entered the comfortable clinic, at 2, Avenue Pozzo-di-Borgo, in the centre of Saint-Cloud also for a detoxification cure paid for by Mlle Chanel. He remained there until April 1929. It was during this stay in Saint-Cloud that he met Raymond Roussel.

Cocteau kept a sort of diary, which was later to become *Opium*. From his window he was able to see Roussel in a neighbouring building. "He looked a little like Proust. He had the same hair, moustache, gait and manner as Proust."* "I have mentioned a similarity between Roussel and Proust. It was a social and physical similarity of figure, voice and nervous habits, which they had picked up in the same social milieu where they spent their youth."† It was during this eight-month stay that Roussel asked him: "Why aren't I as famous as Pierre Loti?"

The dates given by Jean Cocteau are not very clear and rather uncertain. In his notebooks, Michel Leiris wrote that Roussel stayed in Saint-Cloud for eight months and that Dr Joltrain's treatment of him by auto-vaccine was independent and subsequent to the treatment he received from Dr Janet (which proves that he was not called in as early as has been thought, but only after the trip around the world). Roussel was obsessed by food, which he claimed robbed him of his serenity. Dr Joltrain sent him to see Dr Guillain, and probably Dr Maurice de Fleury, a member of the Academy of Medicine, who was sent copies on Japanese vellum of *L'Étoile au Front* ("with the compliments of a grateful former patient, who has grasped 'Human Anxiety'") and *La Poussière de Soleils* ("with the compliments of a grateful patient who is also an 'enthusiastic reader'"). As for Dr Logre, he preferred to let Roussel take his "drugs" rather than wean him off them. In 1933, Charlotte Dufrène told Dr Michele Lombardo in Palermo that Roussel had been abusing barbiturates for two years (at least!), which his doctors had advised him to take, and that the slightest decrease in his intake of "drugs" made him irritable and violent.

It does not seem that his stay in Saint-Cloud brought him the serenity he was looking for, if we are to believe this inscription to a Portuguese friend: "from a companion in misfortune".

Even though the letters have not (yet) been traced, we know that Roussel corresponded with Jean Cocteau, who wrote in *Opium* (1930): "In a postscript to a recent letter that he sent me he quotes a passage from *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* [performed on 18 June 1921 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and published by Gallimard in 1923]:

PHONO ONE. But this letter is dead.

PHONO TWO. It is precisely because it is dead that everyone can understand it.

"This postscript proves that Roussel knew who he was, and what he was owed." With this "dead letter", Cocteau seems to have been near to deciphering Roussel's

* Jean Cocteau, *Entretiens avec André Fraigneau*, 1965.

† Jean Cocteau, *Opium*.

“code”.

Cocteau also remarked in *Opium*: “It is thanks to Gide, who used to read out generous extracts from *Impressions d’Afrique*, that I discovered *Locus Solus* and have recently read the marvellous *Poussière de Soleils*.” But Cocteau does not say that Roussel had sent them to him; what is more, his name is not included in the notebook of dedicatory inscriptions which Roussel kept. However, in 1996, a dozen books dedicated to Roussel came on to the market, including some works by Cocteau, full of letters from him, which leads us to believe that Paris’s furniture warehouses have not yet yielded all their secrets, or all their treasures.

THE DEATH OF GERMAINE ROUSSEL

It was on 21 October 1928, as Roussel noted with great precision, that his sister became “Princesse de la Moskowa”. Napoléon Ney, the Prince de la Moskowa, was born on 11 January 1870, and married HRH Princesse Eugénie Bonaparte, the direct descendent of King Joseph and of Lucien Bonaparte. Napoléon died on this date, childless, at his home at 120, Rue de Courcelles. It was thus his younger brother, Charles Ney, a reserve artillery captain and Raymond Roussel’s brother-in-law, who became the fifth Prince de la Moskowa, and his son Michel Ney the sixth Duc d’Elchingen.

It might strike us as surprising that Raymond Roussel boasted more about his brother-in-law’s titles than his own. But it seems even more surprising that he did so after his sister’s death and his brother-in-law’s remarriage! In fact, Roussel seems to have been extremely close to Charles Ney. There are signs of mutual concern, or even complicity and intimacy between the two men. We know that Charles Ney tried, perhaps clumsily, to take Raymond Roussel’s mind off his neurasthenia, and wanted to put him up for the Jockey-Club. In return, as we shall see, Roussel offered him his services — at Père-Lachaise cemetery!

At the beginning of 1930, Germaine Roussel’s health, which had been bad for several years, became even worse. Her dizzy spells had now turned into blackouts. She sometimes spent hours in her bathtub, having lost all notion of time. She was taken to Dr Doyen’s old clinic, at 6, Rue Piccini in the sixteenth *arrondissement*, where, after an attempt to remove a brain tumour, she died on Thursday 22 May 1930, at two in the morning. She was fifty-six.

That same day, Raymond Roussel received a letter from Charlotte Dufrène:

Thursday

My little Raymond,
Antoine has told me the terrible news. I wish I could find the words to help ease the pain which I know is so deep — that I feel — and that I share.
Charlotte.

The funeral was on Monday 26 May at her parish church, Saint-Pierre-de-Chailhot. The principal mourners were: her son Michel, the Duc d'Elchingen; her brother, Raymond Roussel; her brothers-in-law, HRH Prince Murat, the Prince d'Essling, the Duc d'Albuféra and the Duc de Fézensac (her other brother-in-law, the Duc de Camastra, was in Rome at the time and could not attend the service); her nephews Princes Paul, Jérôme and Pierre Murat, and MM. de Gheest, Louis and Napoléon d'Albuféra and Philippe de Montesquiou; her cousin Victor Grimprel. HRH Princesse Napoléon was represented by Mlle de Bassano. The only absentee was her husband, Charles Ney, from whom she had been separated for many years. No sooner was she dead than he remarried, just one and a half months later, on 10 July 1930 in Nice, where he was living. This makes it all the more surprising that he agreed to her being buried in the family vault, alongside Marshal Ney, in Paris's L'Est-Père-Lachaise cemetery.* At that time, Marshal Ney's vault was full and it was presumably to secure for his sister a place and have her name engraved on it (on the left of the semi-circular tomb) with the title "Duchesse d'Elchingen" (and not "Princesse de la Moskowa" which she could rightfully have claimed) that Raymond Roussel was later to add a codicil to his will on 22 May 1932:

Furthermore, considering that, in general, family vaults are finally filled, I declare that I authorise the members of the following families related to my brother-in-law, Charles Ney, Prince de la Moskowa, to be buried in my vault:

Ney

Murat

Camastra

Masséna

Suchet

Montesquiou-Fézensac

as well as the spouses of the above-mentioned families, and their male or female descendants.

After my death, I wish that this authorisation be communicated to the families concerned.

After his sister's death, Raymond Roussel turned to his nephew and asked him if he would not mind allowing him to go on living on Rue Quentin-Bauchart, where he was to spend most of his time until leaving for Italy.

"My nephew and sole heir, Michel Ney, Duc d'Elchingen and future Prince de la Moskowa, married Mlle Hélène La Caze on 26 February 1931, the grand-daughter on her mother's side of Ferdinand de Lesseps, and the great-niece of Napoléon III and Empress Eugénie. I was a witness at his wedding, along with Prince Murat." This match had been ardently wished for by his mother. It is said that she almost forced him to accept it on her death-bed.

Roussel then drew up a will (which has not been found) in favour of Michel Ney, on 6 February 1931, which was utterly pointless since Michel Ney was his only

* 29th division 1/37, line 16/30, no. 58 PA 1815 (C.A.P. no. 2989 on the Chemin Masséna, at the intersection with the Chemin des Chèvres).

direct heir. He then tried to adopt him, so as to avoid paying death duties, but his lawyer convinced him that this was impossible.

The civil ceremony took place at the town hall of the eighth *arrondissement* on Wednesday 25 February (the witnesses were Prince Joachim Murat and the Marquis de Miramon); the religious service was at Saint-Pierre-de-Chailot the next day (for the groom, the witnesses were Prince Murat and Raymond Roussel, for the bride, Comte Mathieu de Lesseps and Jacques La Caze).*

Michel Leiris continued to see Roussel regularly:

Saturday [January 1931]†

My dear Michel,

I feel extremely embarrassed about the magnificent passage you devoted to me in your wonderful article and I thank you with all my heart.

I should be delighted to see you again. How about Sunday 8 February at 6.30 at Madame Dufrène's, 47, Rue Pierre-Charron?

I have chosen a far-off date so that you will not already be engaged. Otherwise, tell me the days and times that would suit you best; I opened your envelope only after several days, because I thought it was a mere brochure, and did not contain a letter.

Once again a thousand times, and affectionately, thank you.

Raymond Roussel.

Another letter, probably from the same period:

A thousand thanks, my dear Michel. My interview with *Paris-Soir* was extremely pleasant and I also noticed that they had republished some passages from your wonderful article in *Documents*.

A thousand affectionate thoughts.

Raymond Roussel.

A mourning card:

My dear Michel,

I was about to thank you for your beautiful and charming letter when, thanks to you, I read that laudatory article, which I had not yet seen. So I owe you a double thank-you.

Affectionately.

Raymond Roussel.

Michel Leiris of course applied to that "philanthropic author as rich as he is bountiful",‡ with his "innumerable and discreet contributions to charities",§ when he was collecting funds to finance Marcel Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti expedition:

In 1931, even though his fortune was being eaten away, Roussel was still very rich. My father had estimated the Roussel family fortune to be forty million francs. I was sure that he would give me some money. He did so. As for my impressions, he never asked me what they were.

* The marriage was dissolved by the divorce court in 1936, then annulled by the Court of Rome.

† This date, indicated by Michel Leiris, remains doubtful. These letters were written from Rue Quentin-Bauchart on headed mourning-paper, with Raymond Roussel's monogram (two reflecting capital *Rs* interlaced), bordered in black, after the death of his sister.

‡ *La Volonté*, 2 August 1933.

§ Michel Georges-Michel, *Aux Écoutes*, 29 July 1933.

This “ethnographic and linguistic mission”, organised by the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (and the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, which is subordinate to it), set a precedent by being established by an act of parliament on 31 March 1931. Many public bodies, associations, learned societies, and private establishments (such as banks and large companies) contributed, as well as individuals such as David David-Weill, Charles de Noailles, Georges Wildenstein and Raymond Roussel. On 10 January 1931, Marcel Griaule thanked him for his “generous gesture”, after having been informed of it by Michel Leiris, who had joined the expedition as secretary and archivist. It seems that he gave 10,000 francs, and that the same sum was received by Georges-Henri Rivière, the deputy director of the Musée d'Ethnographie.* All the expedition members dedicated to Raymond Roussel a copy of the luxurious programme for a boxing gala organised to raise funds for the expedition, with Marcel Thil, then middleweight champion of France, and Al Brown, the American World bantamweight champion, who was well known in Montmartre.

My dear Michel,

You know how shy I am! At the last moment, I could not work up the courage to face the crowd on the day of the contest. But I intend to go and bid you farewell at the Trocadéro before your departure.

A thousand affectionate thoughts.

Raymond Roussel.

The expedition left Bordeaux on 10 May 1931. Michel Leiris was not to see his father again, as he died after an operation on 16 November.

SALE OF THE HOUSE IN NEUILLY

One and a half months later, on Tuesday 30 June, after long negotiations with his lawyers, Edmond Videcoq and Constantin, Raymond Roussel signed the sale agreement for the Neuilly property which he had inherited from his mother. The buyer was the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, represented by Jean Gournery, Commander of the *Légion d'honneur*, and its director general. The deeds were signed the following Thursday, 2 July, although the buyer was already the *de facto* owner: “However, M. Roussel will as of this day have two weeks to remove all of the furniture and furnishings from his property herewith sold, with the exception of course of all fittings which constitute part of the sale.”

The sale price was 11,550,000 francs. But his need for money did not make Raymond Roussel forget that he was still stubbornly working towards another objective. He thus introduced a special clause into the conditions of the sale: “The

* In 1937, he set up the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires on the Trocadéro. It was transferred to the Bois de Boulogne in 1968.

main avenue [of the lot] will be called Avenue Raymond-Roussel, otherwise the sum of eighteen million stipulated above will be increased by one million francs.” But Roussel was forced to abandon both his financial and topographical claims:

If the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations accedes to his intention to have a new thoroughfare built on the property now being sold, under the present terms, then this thoroughfare must be called “Avenue Raymond-Roussel”. With the condition, of course, that the town of Neuilly-sur-Seine does not absolutely oppose this scheme on the day when this new thoroughfare will be classified as a public thoroughfare.

In this recently constructed neighbourhood, incorporating an extension of Avenue de Bretteville and the new Rue du Maréchal-de-Lattre-de-Tassigny, the town of Neuilly should now actually be proud to make the dream of one of its most glorious citizens come true. The Norman villa at 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, which had been abandoned since 1931, was demolished in 1954 to make way for blocks containing 594 flats. Its inhabitants (A.T. 22, a plot containing: at the back, the Société Immobilière de l’Avenue du Lac-Saint-James, to the right the Château de Madrid, and to the left M. Fenaille) would thus learn that they were living behind the gates of *Locus Solus* — perhaps on the very spot where the semen-contra Federal and the diamond of aqua micans were to be found.

The seller guaranteed to the buyer that the building he had just acquired was insured against fire;* but it was only two weeks later, on 16 July, that the company received a report from a bailiff warning them against accidents that might result from the previous owner’s “experiments”:

AFFIDAVIT

The year nineteen hundred and thirty one
the sixteenth of July

Before me, René Eugène Alexandre REINIG, bailiff with the Civil Court of the Seine, dwelling in Neuilly-sur-Seine at 113 *bis*, Avenue de Neuilly, the undersigned,

APPEARED: Monsieur Roussel dwelling in Neuilly-sur-Seine, 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace

Who stated to me that:

He had recently sold his property situated in Neuilly-sur-Seine, 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace, which is likely to be demolished;

That he had had a small building constructed in the garage on the property for the purpose of conducting experiments;

That this small building is full of glass tubes which, in the event of demolition, could explode if special precautions are not taken.

Accordingly, he asked me to visit the building and draw up an affidavit of what I found.

In accordance with this request, I journeyed that same day to 25, Boulevard Richard-Wallace where, in the presence of Monsieur TREMBLAY, Monsieur Roussel’s butler, I made the following observations:

At the back of the property, to the right, there is a large garage the roof of which consists of blocks of fibro-cement, or a material similar to fibro-cement, and glass panes.

* Since 11 February 1924: insurance policy number 635952, with the Compagnie d’Assurances Générales, 87, Rue de Richelieu, Paris.

In this garage is a small stonework building, about 3.5m wide by about 3.5m long by about 3.5m high, containing a door and a window. To the left of the window I discovered the following inscription, written in black letters:

The walls, the floors, the ceilings, the doors and the windows of this maisonette have been entirely filled with glass tubes in which a vacuum has been created.

In the event of demolition, please take the necessary precautions in order to avoid any accidents.

In this small building's sole room I noticed the presence of about eighty glass tubes.

Monsieur TREMBLAY declared to me that the floors, windows, walls and door are all filled with glass tubes similar to the ones which I had observed inside the room, with a vacuum created within.

I have drawn up the present affidavit to swear on the truth of the above.

Cost: EIGHTY-FIVE FRANCS.

Reinig.

AT PÈRE-LACHAISE CEMETERY

In September, Roussel decided to acquire a grave in Père-Lachaise cemetery. The undertakers Établissements Lecreux Frères carried out his request on 14 November 1931: the grave held in perpetuity is number 126 P, at the north-east corner of the 89th division (1st line facing 93, 1st line 77), at the corner of Avenue Circulaire and Avenue Carette, not far from Oscar Wilde. They designed a vault with sides measuring 11.6m, containing thirty-two cells (eight rows of four cells). Roussel gave the contract to Léon Lecreux, whom he visited frequently. His chauffeur would drop him off in front of the door of 17, Boulevard Ménilmontant, just opposite the cemetery's main gates. Roussel's conversations were clear and precise, but also extremely slow and punctuated by long silences. He spoke barely one sentence per minute. This is how a drug addict talks, and as we shall see Roussel had started taking barbiturates in 1931 to combat his neurasthenia. The discussions were long, and while they lasted, the perfectly turned-out chauffeur would remain at the wheel of the car without uttering a word. The design Raymond Roussel arrived at with Léon Lecreux was for a monument showing him standing in front of a bookcase. With this in mind, Roussel signed an authorisation allowing Lecreux to take a copy of the photograph of him taken in 1896 by Otto et Pirou, 3, Place de la Madeleine. That was how he wanted to be remembered: with the features of a nineteen-year-old. The estimate for the vault came to 250,000 francs, of which 100,000 was for the Carrara marble statue alone. Unfortunately, Raymond Roussel was never to see the Lecreux designs realised. The gouaches* were not yet finished when he left for Italy in 1933.

The dimensions of the vault that Roussel was to occupy alone are astounding: thirty-two cells! Was he thinking of a chess-board? Doubtless so, when he found out that the word *case* is the French term for a sub-division in a vault, the same as the word for a square on a chess-board. So what are these thirty-two squares? The thirty-two

* The two gouaches painted according to Lecreux's instructions measure 44cm wide by 33cm high. The subject was painted standing, but there was also a sketch of him sitting.

empty squares at the start of a game, or the thirty-two occupied ones? Robert Desnos described the characters in *L'Étoile au Front* as being “reduced to the status of chess pieces”. Was this to be the fate Roussel had in mind for the bodies that were to join him? In a codicil to his will, dated 22 May 1932, he got the number of cells in his vault wrong: he first wrote thirty, then corrected it to thirty-two.

The strangest thing is that Roussel could easily have joined his maternal grandparents, his parents and his brother in the family vault he owned in the old cemetery in Neuilly. We must presumably see in this acquisition of a vault in Père-Lachaise a favour he was doing to his brother-in-law Charles Ney, in exchange for allowing his sister into Marshal Ney’s vault. But there is also the rather naïve desire to make himself closer to Charles Ney. There is an echo of this in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*: “Strangely enough, nearly all of the big names of the Empire were united in my brother-in-law’s family...” And why not in his own vault? It was the entire Arc de Triomphe on Place de l’Étoile that he wanted to bury there! But were the Empire’s aristocrats that keen? Michel Leiris mentions that Roussel wanted his tomb to bear the inscription: “Raymond Roussel, brother-in-law of the Prince de la Moskowa”. If that is true, then Michel Ney, the Duc d’Elchingen, prevented him from making a fool of himself by substituting the following inscription, which brings a smile to our lips for a different reason: “Famille Raymond Roussel”.*

When he died, Robert Desnos wrote:

It is said that for his tomb he has acquired a vault in Père-Lachaise with twenty places. That is where he will rest in peace, undoubtedly in a huge silent mausoleum, at the very moment when his work, loved by the young and there to teach us so much, will receive the glory he so desired. (*L’Intransigeant*, 7 August 1933)

It was also at this time that Roussel gave to the Imprimerie Lemerre the manuscript of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, which he had begun in 1915 and finished in 1928, but which would actually appear only in November 1932. Printing was completed, or at least almost so, a full year before the date set for publication [30 June 1932]. On 25 July 1931, Roussel wrote to Eugène Vallée, Lemerre’s typesetter, concerning the “counter-erratum”:

* M. Lecomte remembers only that Roussel had asked him to engrave his name, “Raymond Roussel”, followed by the years of his birth and death below the words “Famille Raymond Roussel”.

† This “counter-erratum”, which is rather like a “sic”, concerns the word “témoin” (here, in *Nouvelles Impressions*, meaning “for example”) which readers might have expected to be in the plural. [Trans.]

Dear Sir,
I think it necessary that the word “*mis*” appear in the counter-erratum, there being already “*volontairement*”. If not, it will appear as though the word itself were voluntarily singular.

What is more, I think “*a été mis*” is better than “*est mis*”, because for the reader this will refer to the period of composition.

Finally, I should prefer there to be no comma before “*c’est*”. This is the text I should suggest:

Page... et page... (*sans virgule*) *c’est volontairement que le mot témoin a été mis au singulier.*

Yours faithfully,

Raymond Roussel.†

NOUVELLES IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE

Fortunately, Eugène Vallée was a patient man and well used to satisfying Lemerre's authors' sometimes mad whims. This can be seen in the letters he wrote to Renée Vivien, asking her to make corrections to poems that she had forgotten had been included in her collection! But money meant little to such poets, and it is certain that Alphonse and Désiré Lemerre made out the necessary bills to cover the demands of their rich clientele.

Raymond Roussel was ruined, but the sale of his property in Neuilly had provided him with a sum which would easily cover the composition and printing of his last two books. In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, he expressed his astonishment at the fact that "it took twenty-two years for the first edition [of *Impressions d'Afrique*] to be sold out". The first, because there was a second edition (which he paid for) in 1932, in the same way that there was a fourth edition of *Locus Solus*.

When *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* came out, Roussel had published no poetry for nearly thirty years. Previously, in *Locus Solus* in 1913, he alluded to poems, such as the stitched virelay or the parable of Chrysomallo, but without feeling that it was necessary for us to read them. Even his plays, despite the craze for verse drama for which Edmond Rostand was not the only model,* were written in prose.

The first edition's publication date is 30 June 1932. But we know from the dates on the printer's proofs that composition began in 1927. Roussel had started writing this book in 1915.

Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique was to have included a descriptive part. It consisted of a miniature pair of opera-glasses, each tube of which, just two millimetres wide and designed to be pressed against the eye, contained a photograph on glass, one showing the bazaars in Cairo [the *Jardins de Rosette vus d'un dahabieh*, subtitled: *Environs du Caire*† does not seem to correspond to this photograph], the other the quay at Luxor.

I wrote the description of these two photographs in verse. (It was, in fact, a precise recommending of my poem *La Vue*.)

Once this initial work was over, I reworked the text from the beginning to polish the verse. But after a certain while, I felt that an entire lifetime would not be enough for such a revision, and I abandoned the task. All of this had taken five years of work [that is to say until 1920, at the earliest]. So, if from the thirteen and a half years that passed between 1915 and autumn 1928, I take away the five years that I have just mentioned, plus the time it took me to write *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*, then I should say that it took me seven years to write *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in the form in which it was presented to the public.

To which must be added nearly four years, from 27 November 1927 to 30 June 1931, of work on the proofs, to such an extent that Eugène Vallée felt obliged to add a note to one set of them:

* For example, Roussel was a great admirer of Miguel Zamacoïs, the author of *Bouffons*, a four-act verse play (1904), but also a theatre critic (he was the *Monsieur de l'Orchestre* ["The Man in the Stalls"] in *Le Figaro* from 1901). Roussel's inscriptions to him are ecstatic: "Enthusiastic compliments from one of his closest unknown friends", "With the compliments of one of his devotees", "With the compliments of an extremely assiduous and clamorous admirer", "With all of Raymond Roussel's fervent admiration".

† This is the title of Canto IV of *Nouvelles Impressions*. [Trans.]

I am sending you a complete set, including your latest corrections.

These proofs represent *the final state*, as it stands today. All previous proofs become null and void and should be destroyed in order to avoid any confusion in the future.

I am keeping a second copy of these final proofs.

Annie Le Brun agreed with him:

He was quite right, for on a previous set of proofs, Roussel had added a page in writing with no fewer than thirty-eight lines to be added to the second note of the first canto (lines 8 to 45) and, to the set of 18 July 1928, he added four manuscript pages with multiple crossings-out, which correspond to lines 30 to 63 of the first canto, plus a page with similar crossings-out corresponding to lines 544 to 565 of the second canto. This would not have been completely unreasonable, were it not for the fact that *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* consists of 1271 alexandrines, 280 of them in footnotes, the whole divided into four cantos. But these four cantos are organised into a system of parentheses, which fit into each other down as far as five levels like Russian dolls, and into which the footnotes take root, representing, for example, 134 lines in the fourth canto, whereas the canto itself has only 98 lines.

For greater security, Roussel deposited the different stages of this long poem, fragment by fragment, in envelopes in his stockbroker's office safe, or in his box at the Crédit Lyonnais. We possess envelopes dated 15 October 1916, 12 November 1916 and 2 March 1917, numbered 11, 13 and 14 (which indicates that many others have been lost). Then there is the envelope dated 16 March 1917, which Michel Leiris found among his father's papers, and which contains 104 lines from the first canto, *without parentheses*.

Roussel's calculations unsettle many readers: *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, begun in 1915, completed in 1928, from which period he subtracted the five years spent restarting *La Vue*, then the time needed to write *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Soleils*, thus making seven years. But:

$$\textit{Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique} = 14 - (5 + x) = 7; \text{ so } x = 2.$$

On the other hand, he confided to Robert Desnos that: "I spent twelve years on that relatively short book. According to my calculations, each line represents about fifteen hours' work";* i.e.

$$(228 + 642 + 172 + 232) \times 15 = 19,110 \text{ hours' work.}$$

Or $19,110 \div 7 = 2730$ hours per year, which seems quite a lot.

In fact, as Michel Foucault recognised, "the meaning of this calculation remains rather unclear". And yet this way of calculating literary productivity, as though it were any other sort of work, is highly instructive. It shows us that what mattered to Roussel was the length of his working day — who cares whether it was for *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, the "recommencement" of *La Vue*, *L'Étoile au Front* or *La Poussière de Soleils*? "One of Roussel's characteristics as a genius," wrote Michel Leiris in 1935, "is the association of his relentless work and his extraordinarily inventive faculties." One cannot exist without the other, for his

* Robert Desnos, *L'Intransigeant*, 7 August 1933.

inventiveness — either in the prose works written with the “procedure”, or the verse works constructed like precise mechanical objects — refused any sort of spontaneous inspiration and consigned him to hard but exalting labour.

We can catch a glimpse of this work from Michel Leiris’s notes:

Work: on average three hours every morning + overtime when he was busy. In like manner he gave himself breaks of two or three days.

Beginning and ending at a precise time.

Had spent days and days in his study in order to be free for Tahiti.

In Neuilly, he sometimes wrote even in the morning by electric light with the shutters down.

At the bottom of his draft pages, Roussel kept a record:

11h Sat. 8 Sun. 9¼ Monday. 10¼ Tuesday. 12¼ Wed. 11h Tuesday + 13h Wednesday. 10h Thursday. 11h Saturday...

A letter to Michel Leiris, dated April 1927, thanking him for a postcard of the Sphinx, contains a reminder that Roussel had visited Egypt in 1906. While the Africa in *Impressions d’Afrique* is vague, localities are specified in *Nouvelles Impressions*: Damietta, the outskirts of Damietta, the Pyramids and the Rosetta Gardens near Cairo. And doesn’t the beginning of the fourth poem (or “lyrical poem”, in Michel Leiris’s words) seem to capture real “impressions”?

Skimming the Nile, I see two banks shoot by
Full of flowers, wings, glints, rich greenery,
Any of which would fill twenty salons
[((((((...)))))]
With rays and fruit, with dark shadowy leaves.

The rest of this fourth poem is contained within the parentheses which open up between the third and the last line above. The first two lines are like a colour postcard, what a tourist on a steamer might see from the Nile, if the verb “to skim” did not instead suggest a journey in a dahabeeya or a felucca. The Gardens of Rosetta are not Behuliphruen. We are no longer in the same Africa.

So what does the title mean? In an inscription to Philippe Clément, Roussel talks of:

this continuation (!) of *Impressions d’Afrique*.

What does an exclamation-mark in brackets mean in an inscription describing Russian-doll poems which open and close with parentheses? To distinguish the two titles in his book of inscriptions, Roussel noted sending “*Anciennes Imp. d’Afr.*” to Princess Tekan Pomaré, and “*Anc. Imp.*” to Raymond Queneau. In his mind, was

there really a connection between the two books, and why did he feel the need to include a reference to his first novel,* constructed entirely by his imagination?

In his *Impressions* the false explorer...

Does that mean that the only "true" explorer is the poet-narrator of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* and that his Egypt is more real than West Africa?

While Roussel seemed content simply to open and close the layers of anecdotes in his other books, in *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* it is language itself which he dislocates, opening trapdoors below words that lead to shafts at the end of which corridors with successive doors take us to the square chamber of the labyrinth — and back again, which is certainly more difficult. The poems in *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* have caused some people to think that Raymond Roussel's brain was not constituted in the same way as yours or mine.† But let's not exaggerate. At a time when nobody could have imagined the invention of the modern computer, Roussel analysed and programmed his own language:

My soul is a strange factory...

What we do not know (and perhaps never will) is whether he began work on the system of the poem with independent blocks, which he then fitted together (the parentheses would then be the stitches between the units), or whether he conceived each poem as a whole, without any visible points of reference, and with no other sign of inclusion than commas, which he later replaced with brackets. In the former case, the difficulties for the writer were surely not so great as he claimed; on the other hand, in the latter case, the problems seem unsurmountable. Perhaps he adopted an intermediate solution, and worked by moving blocks around, as could easily be done on a computer today.

It is nevertheless clear that these poems, with their parentheses and footnotes, were just as problematic as he said: with their chopped-up, dislocated lines, which are unlike any known writing in verse, and which can never be modified because the constraint of the rhyme is so strong. Even before the discovery of the manuscripts now held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, the first fragmentary draft (four typewritten pages of the first poem, *Damietta*) in an envelope deposited with Eugène Leiris shows that Roussel initially intended to write a perfectly smooth poem. As in the final version, a parenthesis opens after the tenth line. Another parenthesis (and not two) opened inside this clause, followed by a further one (and not three), and so on. How much work with this jigsaw will be needed to allow us to decipher the poem? In the final version, Roussel adopted a clear system of double or triple (etc.) brackets, and by the bottom of the first page had arrived at a quintuple bracket. The

* There are other allusions to *Impressions d'Afrique*, for example, in Canto II, Juliet and Romeo at the Gala of Ejur.

† Michel Georges-Michel, *Aux Écoutes*, 29 July 1933: "He claimed to have four brains." Bernard Lelou, *Paris-Midi*, 1 August 1933: "With age, the author's brain became quadruple. At least that is what the author affirms."

footnotes were originally further parentheses inside the text (and not at the bottom of the page), separated from the main text by a space (a blank line above and below the parenthesis). The lines in the main text and in the parentheses were in normal rhymed couplets. It is thus easier to understand that the first line of the note rhymes with the line containing the note's number. Roussel simply detached a few lines from his poem and placed them at the bottom of the page. The reader must therefore read the notes as they come, when he is invited to, no sooner and no later.

This system of brackets that puts surprised readers off the first time they attempt *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* should actually reassure them. The number of opening brackets allows us to look ahead for the same number of closing brackets, something which would have been impossible in the usual system of punctuating parenthetical clauses in a text (a single bracket or comma).

Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique consists of four extremely short poems (?) inflated with parentheses. Does each of these four texts have any intrinsic meaning? Is all the signification of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* contained in these short poems, or is it located elsewhere?

I have cited the four lines of the fourth poem which describe sailing on the Nile. The first poem (*Damietta. The house where Saint Louis was kept prisoner*) is, so to speak, the longest with nine + four lines; the second (*The Battlefield of the Pyramids*) has just three lines (already with two parentheses) + four and a half lines; and the third (*The Column...*) has five lines + one. "Between" these lines that open and close each poem, there are hundreds of other lines which have (apparently?) absolutely nothing to do with them.

What was Roussel's objective? Larding?* Manufacturing parentheses? To confuse the reader? These brackets within brackets were certainly not the purpose of the book. Roussel had other things in mind. The first point to note is that, whatever "procedure" he used, Roussel always came round full circle. The homophony between first and last sentences, the inner rhymes, the echoes, and so on, close each particular work on to itself. They round it off, and the work is thus egg-like, a finite object. When the book has been closed and the curtain come down, the readers and spectators become strangers once more.

As for Michel Leiris, his hypothesis was that "*Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* was essentially constructed by deliberate additions to an extremely simple basic sentence, set down once and for all, and increasing only through accretions which pile up so high that its meaning is hidden, at least at first sight".

It remains to be understood whether Roussel was happy with these little scraps of verse stuffed full of hundreds of lines of poetry. It is as if, when writing the brief description that would generate the poem, he did not know which parentheses it would lead to. Hence, no doubt, the difficulty he mentioned in writing such verse. The text was engendering itself.

* A term used by the Oulipo (of which both François Caradec and Ian Monk are members). It is defined in the *Oulipo Compendium* (ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, Atlas Press, 1998), as follows:

"Warren Motte has used the convenient term *larding* as an equivalent of *le tireur à la ligne*, the name given by Jacques Duchateau to a procedure that is his speciality. "Line stretching" refers to the 19th-century practice of paying magazine contributors (such as Alexandre Dumas) by the line — a practice that encouraged them to stretch their material to maximum length.

Duchateau describes the method: From a given text, pick two sentences. Add a new sentence between the first two; then two sentences in the new intervals that have become available; and continue to add sentences until the passage has attained the length desired. The supplementary sentences must either enrich the existing narrative or create a new narrative continuity." [Eds.]

But why did he want to make us think that it was the verse description of two small photographs, “in fact, a precise recommencing of my poem *La Vue*”, when this is evidently false? He then went on: “Once this initial work was over, I reworked the text from the beginning to *polish* the verse.”

That’s right: *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* is a text identical to *La Vue*, except that the verse has been *polished*. With Roussel, it is never enough to know what the text “says”, it is also necessary to discover what it “hides”. And to find out what procedure Roussel modestly calls “polishing”.

What a strange desire to open a parenthesis inside a description, however short, then a further one inside that parenthesis and so on in order to specify a detail. Then, from parenthesis to parenthesis, from specification to specification, to “devour” quite literally from within the “view” he is supposed to be describing.

We now possess a few rough drafts, such as the following fragment of the first poem. As usual, Roussel first jotted down the rhymes, although he did not follow them closely: *omet* and *sommet* were replaced by *Apelle* and *chapelle*; but *gilet* and *filet*, *véncrie* and *sonncrie* were retained despite the difficulties subsequently encountered:

* Facing his easel (,) the proud
rival of Apelles

[Who is] superstitious without
there being

Who succeeds with everything to
whom in the crowd;

of Apelles
writes on
omits

Whose name is famous, centre of a
Is far from shy, brushes the hump
of a

When a hunchback strolls past
with a touch

Whose new talent has give rise to a
Hump

Who, mature, around him senses
the summit
school (;)

Gripping his racquet (,)
The tennis king without a jacket,
in white, fresh, without

A skilled sportsman able to crush
some

The great player who crushes,
when serving

Gripping his racquet, without a
jacket, in white, on the net,
waistcoat (,)

Aiming, gripping his racket, the
edge

The tennis king who scorns
gripping

Gripping his bare racquet
Comes, racquet held high, the
crest of the

A high racquet, in white, without
a jacket

Ready, racquet back, to crush

Gripping his racquet, standing
behind

The tennis king who scorns the
the sportsman, good at

Face à son chevalet (,) l'émule altier d'Apelle
[Qui] superstitieux jamais sans qu'il
Que tout réussit à qui dans la foule

d'Apelle
écrit sur
omet

Dont rayonne le nom, centre d'une
n'a timide, effleuré la bosse d'un
Quand flâne un dos bossu d'un toucher
Dont le talent neuf a fait naître une

Bosse
Qui, mûr, autour de lui sent le sommet
chapelle (;)

Raquette au poing (,)
Le roi du tennis sans veste, en blanc, frais, sans
Sportman habile à raser certain
Le grand joueur qui rase, en servant
Raquette au poing, sans veste, en blanc, sur le filet gilet (,)
Visant, raquette au poing, le rebord
Le roi du tennis qui se moque
au poing

Raquette nue au poing
Vient, raquette en l'air, la crête du
Haut la raquette, en blanc, sans veste
Prêt, raquette en arrière, à raser
Raquette au poing, debout derrière
Le roi du tennis qui se moque du

*l'homme à sports, fort en**

ni gilet filet (,)
l'homme à sports fort en maître en fait de
L'infatué Tout équipé (,) le maître en fait de
Tout équipé centaure épris de
l'instruit veneur qui lorsqu'on
En selle le l'oisif épris de vénerie (,)
Lançant (,) magister de
plein de souffle
Lançant du haut de sa selle
cambré le cor pris pour un
Sans marchander paye en maître de sa
Tout équipé le cor prêt pour la
martiale (,) lançant en selle
personne
*En train de lever en selle une sonnerie (;)**

What we have here needs closer examination. In *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, it is not possible that Roussel simply let himself be guided by the rhymes, even going so far as to drop one pair for another (in the case above, the superstitious person convinced that everything comes out right if you touch the "summit" of a hunchback's back is replaced by the success of a painter).

Despite all of his efforts, Raymond Roussel had to face facts. His book was an extremely thin volume. He then started to puff up the text. Successive typescripts show that a poem which originally had only 104 lines was more than doubled by the addition in four different places of 36 + 68 + 4 + 16 = 124 lines, thus reaching a new total of 228.

HENRI-A. ZO

But these additions were not enough. The final text of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* took up just fifty-nine pages! Eugène Vallée, the typesetter at the Imprimerie Lemerre, told Michel Leiris that the initial purpose of the illustrations was not aesthetic, but rather to fill out the volume, almost doubling it in size. In 1935, at a time when the printer's memories were still fresh, Michel Leiris was categorical: "The illustrations [...] were produced to order, through a private detective agency, without Roussel having any direct contact with the artist, and without him having any knowledge of the text..."

Marie-François Goron, the director of the Agence Goron, had previously been a police commissioner in Pantin, then deputy head and finally head of the Sûreté from 1887 to 1894. But he was also a man of letters (*Mémoires de M. Goron*, and other works recounting his life in the force). An advertisement for Agence Goron, 8, Rue de Berri (telegraph: GORLYNX), appeared in all the high-society almanacs. It was

* nor waistcoat net (,)
the sportsman skilled in terms
of
The infatuated Fully equipped (,)
the master in terms of
Fully equipped the centaur enamoured of
the trained huntsman who
when one
In the saddle, the the idler
enamoured of hunting (,)
Sending out (,) master of
full of puff
Sending out from his high saddle
sounded the horn taken for a
Without haggling pays royally for
his
Fully equipped the horn ready for
the
martially (,) sending out in the
saddle
no one
While raising in his saddle a horn
blast (;)

through his mediation that Zo received the *Indications for 59 Drawings*.

There were many reasons why Roussel would have known Henri Zo (who signed his work Henri-A. Zo to indicate that he was the son of the painter Achille Zo). He was a “genre painter”, producing scenes of bullfights, nudes, portraits and landscapes, as well as being an illustrator of some repute. He was born in 1873 in Bayonne,* and died in an accident in 1933, two months after Roussel. Laden down with prizes and medals, he had been a *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* since 1910, and had exhibited at the Salon des Artistes français since 1895. He participated in the decoration of the Opéra-Comique and of the chapel on Rue Jean-Goujon, which had been built to commemorate the victims of the fire that destroyed the Bazar de la Charité in 1897. But it is above all his Pyrenean origins that would have come to Roussel’s attention. He was a regional painter *par excellence*, and was extremely well known in Biarritz, Hendaye and Cambo, as was his sister Blanche-Marie Adélaïde Zo-Laroque (born in Bayonne in 1876) who was also a painter.

Was it really the Agence Goron that found this artist at Roussel’s request? Or was it not rather Roussel who indirectly offered the “job” to Zo? If so (and this seems most likely), then he certainly did not want the artist in question to be able to read the text he was to illustrate, nor to ask him questions, or, even worse, make any suggestions.

Michel Leiris confirmed that Roussel must have known Zo, since he had commissioned him to paint a picture evoking the battle of *Hernani* and Robert Desnos’s rejoinder during the performance of *L’Étoile au Front*. Furthermore, he cannot have been unaware that Henri Zo had produced the etchings to illustrate Pierre Loti’s novel *Ramuntcho* (1908, Société du Livre — 130 copies, of which only fifteen were put on sale). In fact, the Agence Goron perhaps simply found his Paris address, which was hardly problematical. Zo lived at 126, Boulevard Montparnasse, and his name was in the telephone directory.

The folder which contains the fifty-nine plates that Zo produced is labelled: “59 drawings / M. Roussel / 19-4-32.” The format of these Indian-ink drawings is 10.5cm x 14.5cm, subsequently reduced to 8 x 11 for publication. Above each drawing, an unknown hand has copied out Raymond Roussel’s “indications”.

Roussel’s choice of which anecdotes and incidents in *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* to illustrate is interesting, since it allows us to understand how he “saw” the places, stories, characters and actions his imagination had created.

If the aim of these illustrations was indeed to double the size of the book, then as soon as the typesetting was completed Roussel knew exactly how many were needed and where to place them. It was thus from the galley proofs that he selected the lines to be illustrated. But this raises a question: should the plate appear on the page before or after the line it illustrates? In the first edition (Lemerre), the plates appear *after* the page containing the line in question. They are thus a graphic “description” of what comes before. Each of these illustrations corresponds to one

* His work can be seen in the Musée de Bayonne; the Musée d’Orsay has just one of his canvases in its reserve collection.

line in one of the poems, except for the illustration produced for “indication” number 40 (see *Épaves*, p.292):

A restaurant waiter holding two knives, forming a cross, which he is taking to carve a chicken.
(No other figures.)

which describes two lines that lie a long way apart:

We see forming a cross (((...)))

Two tinkling knives which a carver sharpens

[Lemerre, p.53]

[Lemerre, p.157]

What we do not know is *why* Roussel selected particular lines for the illustrations. The selection was certainly not random. Was it because they seemed the most “visual” to him, and thus the easiest to illustrate, or is there a different explanation? For example, in the series of alternatives, Roussel demonstrates (or proves?) that there are two ways to confuse items (mistake *x* for *y*) by means of a third approach, which is not poetic but graphic.

The secret entrusted to the Agence Goron was closely guarded. Thus, when Zo received his copy of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, he could not hide his surprise, nor a hint of irritation:

Paris, 17 October 1932

Dear Master,

I have just received your two volumes, and I thank you for them.

I have now read *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, illustrated by my own drawings!

Allow me to tell you that I bitterly regret the fact that you wove such an impenetrable mystery around our collaboration.

These are not the drawings I would have produced had I known that I was illustrating Raymond Roussel!

The meticulousness of the description of each plate which you commissioned did not reveal your hand, and that is why my drawings are lacking in liberty and fancy.

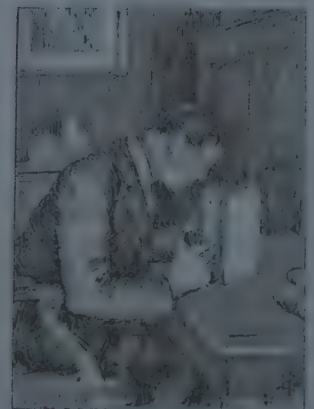
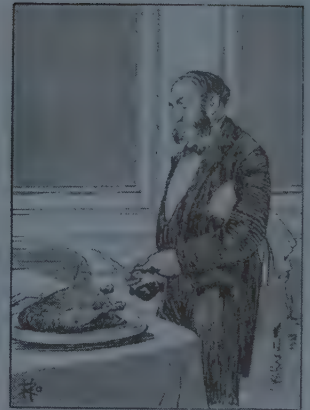
Even the technique is unsuitable, since the dryness of pen and ink drawings does not match the abundance and tumult of your verses.

I also regret not having been able to meet the photo-engraver, as I had requested. A few retouches would certainly have improved the result.

All of this is to tell you, dear Master, that if my drawings have the strange fate to illustrate the text that I have read today for the first time, then they would have been closer to your work if I had been able to read the text and had the honour of meeting the poet in person.

Roussel must have congratulated himself for having acted in secret! One month after sending out the book (“his very great and very grateful admirer and friend”), he received a letter from Jacques-Émile Blanche, who was not very happy either:

But why, dear Raymond, did you choose that illustrator, whose aesthetics are so opposed to yours? Chagall, for example, would have been more appropriate than this Zo — especially



when considering the readership you have.

There is also another way for a publisher to increase the size of a book: text and pictures are printed only on the facing side of the pages. As for the folding of the sheets, if the pages are left uncut, this would allow the text to be read without revealing the hidden illustrations, which surely answered to the author's secret intentions, as J.-B. Brunius, Michel Leiris and Jean Ferry have all pointed out.* Eugène Vallée also told Michel Leiris that Roussel had envisaged having his poems printed using different-coloured inks instead of brackets, just as the Simultanists had suggested before 1914.† This printing method would practically have forced Roussel to go back over his original text line by line. He had to give up the idea because of difficulties with the composition, imposition and printing — and most certainly because of the cost.

L'ÂME DE VICTOR HUGO

In a letter to Eugène Vallée, Roussel asked him to be careful that there were no mistakes with the brackets, and added: "The important thing is to come as close as possible to perfection."

But perfection is not of this world. The cover and title-page of the first edition (and also of a "third" edition, which has the same publication date, 30 June 1932, as the first) are incomplete. The inclusion of the poem *L'Âme de Victor Hugo*, originally published in 1897 as *Mon Âme*, was not part of Raymond Roussel's original plans for the book. Instead, he had left instructions with his lawyer for it to be published after his death. When he decided that his volume was too slim, he decided to add it (it appears on pages 239 to 313) — but then forgot to have it mentioned! In the review copies of his book which he sent out after the holiday season was over in September and October 1932, Roussel wrote on the cover and title-page: "Followed by *L'Âme de Victor Hugo* (p.241)."

This long poem written in his early youth takes on a different meaning thirty-five years later. Now, Raymond Roussel boldly rhymed "*génie universel*" with "*Victor Hugo*". In 1897, in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, he had not been so falsely modest. The rhyme was then emphatically "*Raymond Roussel*", and this poem written in the first person singular evidently refers to him and to nobody else. So why hide behind Victor Hugo? Out of pride? Or, on the contrary, because he had given up his quest for glory? Or quite simply because that name is the Great Synonym: Victor Hugo is *the poet par excellence*?

However, how can Roussel have imagined that the reader would hear "*Hugo*", when the verse cries out for a rhyme in "*se!*"?

* See "*La machine à imprimer Roussel, ou l'impression des 'Impressions'*", *Bizarre*, 34-5.

† This dream has been fulfilled in part by Jean-Michel Espitallier and Jacques Sivan in the twelfth issue of the review *Java* (winter 1994/95) with the third poem (*The Column...*). The printer could also have suggested to Roussel increasingly bold type-faces, italics, roman types of different fonts (and even different font sizes!). But, as a musician, why didn't Roussel envisage a polyphonic reading? We must now wait for a CD-ROM of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique!*

Perhaps the key to the procedure that was “close to rhyme” (at least in so far as Roussel managed or wanted to reveal it) is in this “rhyme”. All his life, in each line of all his works, via every possible digression (extending right up to the writing of entire novels) Roussel may have been hiding away his name. In 1932, with the rhyme “*Hugo/Roussel*” he thus gave us the skeleton key we need to read him, and hammered it home so that even the dumbest of readers would understand once and for all that his work had just one purpose: to radiate the *name* of Raymond Roussel.

By republishing this poem written in his youth, Roussel perhaps also wanted to prove that he had really become a “universal genius” and, like Victor Hugo, a “thinker”. In *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, Michel Leiris identified ten proverbial phrases* and noted: “Evidently, Roussel wanted to become a great moralist.”

With *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, by reusing his first poem as well as the title of his first play and first novel, Roussel had come full circle. *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* could thus be considered his most ambitious book, not just because of its form, but also for its content — and his most coherent, since it covers his entire intellectual life from 1895 to 1932.

The misprints and subsequent corrections, both on the cover and in the body of the text, exasperated Roussel. For a new edition of *Impressions d’Afrique* in 1932, Roussel gave the printer a copy containing a few indications of corrections, some of which give rise to questions. On page 7, line 24, *tronc* was replaced by *stipe* and, in brackets in the margin, there is a definition: “*tronc de palmier*”; “page 32, *La pie en sautillant* [?] [or *en marchant*?];... , *idem*”; on page 763, line 5, *point* was replaced by *nœud d’arrêt* [?], the word “*arrêt*” being crossed out in pencil.†

It was once again the Agence Goron which was hired by the Imprimerie Lemerre both to look for the documentary texts for *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres* and to answer the lexicological questions Roussel had raised on his corrected copy. On 14 June 1932, Goron wrote to Eugène Vallée asking him to send the “photographs” of *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton*, *L’Inconsolable*, *Têtes de Carton du Carnaval de Nice* and *Nanon*. He added:

I have written to M. Roussel concerning the Magpie, saying that I have found in the *Grandc Encyclopédie*, volume 26, page 866, the following information about the common magpie (Pica caudata):

“... its gait is a succession of *little hops* like that of a Passerine.”

Eugène Vallée himself bought the two volumes of Dr Janet’s *De l’Angoisse à l’extase*, in order to copy out the passages about Martial (unfortunately he overlooked a certain number of them in volume two).

* Glory detests fresh looks.
For the unlearned the earth’s like a
tray.
Constant construing is mete for
mankind.
How much prosperity, great
happiness,
Has a foul source when our eyes
are open!
A single day makes a sick dog
rabid.
Often, reading is deceiving.
Objects’ uniqueness is often
specious.
All fires go out, in us as in nature.
... only dead fame
Has a statue and a street with its
name.
How much a word’s force changes
with its case!

† *Tronc* (trunk), *stipe* (stem);
tronc de palmier (palm-tree
trunk); *la pie en sautillant... en
marchant* (the hopping magpie...
walking); *point* (stop), *nœud
d’arrêt* (stop-knot). [Trans.]

INSCRIPTIONS... AND CONSECRATION

Raymond Roussel sent his book to Robert Desnos:

Page 311:

While forming an incessant queue,
Untried and powerful workers
Leave the suburbs of the city
To continue with their labours.

Confraternally written for Robert Desnos by his grateful
October 1932

Raymond Roussel*

It was the first time Roussel implied that his young and “untried” admirers might be called on “to continue with [his] labours”. Desnos replied enthusiastically:

My stupefaction before such a renewal of poetry is not, properly speaking, astonishment. My admiration for you had prepared me for such an upheaval. [...] These are poems made more for eternity than for popularity.

And, on 3 December:

As I told you, I admire *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* as being one of the few important books to be published in the last twenty years. I am preparing an article about it which I shall publish in a large newspaper in a month or a month and a half.

In this letter, Desnos also asked Roussel to send a copy to Lise Deharme, the editor of *Phare de Neuilly*, whose first issue had just come out. If we add up all the articles and notes by Robert Desnos about Raymond Roussel, then we quickly come to the conclusion that he was not only the most faithful but also the sincerest of the Surrealists as regards Roussel. The correspondence of his friends rather betrays their desire for signed copies on Japanese vellum.

Such is the case with René Char, who wrote to Roussel on 30 November, claiming that he had failed to find *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in three bookshops, after having seen it at Paul Éluard's. “My disappointment is great. Could you send me a copy?” Why not? Roussel sent him a copy on Japanese vellum with his “gratitude for his friendly letter”.

This was also the case with Raymond Queneau, who wanted to review it for *La Critique sociale*. He took the opportunity to express his “complete admiration for the author of *Impressions d'Afriques* [sic] and of *Locus Solus* — and for the new bishop and knight checkmate”.

Roussel also sent out his book to his friends and admirers. To Dr Baratoux (or Dr Clément?):

* Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. The same quotation appears on a copy on Japanese vellum: “Written for / Henri de Régner / with all the fervent admiration of / Raymond Roussel. Nov. 1932.” Catalogue Cécile Éluard-Valette, no. 13, October 1977.

Dear Doctor,

While sending you this book, I add the affectionate thoughts of a very old friend.

Raymond Roussel. October 1932.

And, in brackets (!):

(Do not bother to read the comments published below, they are exactly the same as those in *La Poussière de Soleils*, except the first two pages and the last three.)

He wrote the same parenthesis verbatim on the copy he sent Suzanne Grimprel. Apparently he really did not want his friends to read the quotations in the booklet a second time, especially since it does not seem to have been included in a single copy of the ordinary edition, but only in the copies on Japanese vellum.

For Louis Barthou, he made a point of adding to the title, *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*: "Followed by the Soul of the son of 'General Hugo (page 241)'" . To Jean Cocteau he was "his great and thankful admirer". While he was at it, he sent "all [his] admiration" to Paul Souday, who had died in 1929!

He also wrote to Salvador Dalí, who had just sent him *Babaouo*, published by Les Cahiers Libres.*

A thousand thanks, my dear *confrère*, for your delightful gift and precious inscription which seem to show that you already know my *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, which makes me proud. It is with great curiosity and much confraternal feeling that I shall read *Babaouo*.

Your deeply grateful

Raymond Roussel.

4 November 1932.

Shortly after having sent his book to his cousin, Suzanne Grimprel, his niece Nicole informed him that she had read *La Vuc* and greatly enjoyed it. Roussel expressed his surprise and answered (even more surprisingly) as follows: "I shall send you *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*... It is easier to understand." When Nicole got married, her uncle, who had not been able to attend the wedding, wrote this movingly sincere postcard to her at the Château de la Gondelaine in Contres (Loir-et-Cher) — depicting Lancret's *Spring*, Musée du Louvre:

My dear Nicole,

I was extremely touched by your kind letter. It was rather a health reason that prevented my coming to your wedding, for my absence was due to my cursed shyness, which is a real sickness! But my heart was with you, as you know. I have heard good news from Michel [Ney] and Hélène [his wife]. I send a thousand affectionate thoughts to you both.

Raymond.

Roussel also kept up a correspondence with his real admirers, who were ordinary readers. The most precocious of them was Jean-Loup Cohen (77, Rue de Lille), who

* Mourning-card, reproduced in the edition of *Babaouo* published by Ediciones Liberales, Barcelona, 1978.

sent Roussel an admiring letter on 22 January 1932. He was twelve and a half! Roussel inserted a sentence from his young critic into the new booklet of "Criticism and Raymond Roussel": "*Impressions d'Afrique* is the summit of inventive genius." Jean-Loup Cohen then thanked him on 27 October.

He wrote a long inscription on the flyleaf of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* to Jenny Guyot, whose address was the Accueil Social Franco-Américain, 40 bis, Rue du Pré-Saint-Gervais:

Dear Mademoiselle Jenny Guyot. I can only be flattered at the bequest of Notebooks that you mentioned. If I should survive you, then I shall in turn bequeath them to someone who is sure and capable of appreciating them. I am sending you these *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* with my usual trust in your kind interest in my work. Do not bother to read the comments published below, they are exactly the same as those in *La Poussière de Soleils*, except the first two pages and the last three. Yours sincerely, dear Mademoiselle Jenny Guyot.

Raymond Roussel.

Who can this Jenny Guyot have been? And what did her "notebooks" contain? Works of fiction? A diary? Was Jenny Guyot related to Madeleine Guyot-Bussière, Raymond Roussel's nanny? Her daughter perhaps? If so, then she would have been his foster sister. We do not possess his letters to people who had served his mother or himself, but his kindness to them should not astonish us, nor his "trust" in their "kind interest" in his work. But this is pure conjecture.

Roussel waited until the end of October before placing his first advertisement for his new book in the *Bibliographie de la France*, the booksellers' official organ. In issue number 44, dated 28 October, there is a one-page advertisement from the Librairie Lemerre devoted to Roussel's works. Until then, Lemerre had never announced their publication, not even in the lists of "new publications", where the worst does not always rub shoulders with the best. We can wonder why Lemerre, who had unfailingly published all of Roussel's works from 1897 to 1935, albeit at his own expense, seems never before to have given the slightest publicity as regards booksellers, apart from the free listing in the *Librairie Française*.

The publication date mentioned on copies of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* is 30 June. In this advertisement of 28 October, which Roussel must also have paid for, the book is announced as being "published on 7 November". Why had he decided once again to postpone its appearance?

The advertisement is not very informative. The list of works "already published by the same author", which follows the title *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in block capitals, begins with *Impressions d'Afrique*. He thus wanted to give the impression that his *Nouvelles Impressions* was a continuation of his *Impressions*, without even pointing out in the advert that the second work was in verse, which must surely have surprised readers of the first book, which is in prose. What is more, in this list *La Vue*

is followed by the description "Poetry", but nothing indicates that *La Doublure* is a verse novel.

We have no idea how many ordinary or Japanese vellum copies were printed. The advert simply gives their prices:

A decimo-octavo super-royal copy. Price15F.
Copies on Japanese vellum120F.

The list of previous works by the same author makes no mention of other books on Japanese vellum, and gives the prices of the ordinary editions only.* And yet, more than thirty years later, there were still some left! One surprise is that, if *Chiquenaude* had not sold out, why did Roussel forget its publication date in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*?

Having decided that the professional press and its advertising were insufficient, Roussel published a one-page advert accompanied by quotations in the *Annuaire général des Lettres* (p.311). This intrigued *Le Petit Bleu*, which published an article in December entitled:

Mystery and publicity

WHY?

*What betokens the illustrated pages of advertising
that M. Raymond Roussel devotes to his glory?*

These last few days, several newspapers have published short articles in a uniform style, decorated with the portrait of a child, in which M. Raymond Roussel modestly reminds his contemporaries of his existence. The article's title is itself a sort of programme: "The consequence [*sic*] of genius by the initial snub". This is little, but it clearly states the advertiser's meaning.

What is the purpose of this advert?

In the *Bulletin annexe du Journal officiel*, when a company publishes a press release, it adds: "The purpose of this release is..."

What has M. Roussel in store for us? He whose dramatic works have remained in the public's mind above all because of a certain line where there is talk of "rails of veal lights"? It's a mystery. It is probable that this mystery will soon be solved. We must add that we are awaiting the hour of revelation with no particular impatience.

Sure enough, the following article appeared in *Le Matin* of the 6, and *L'Excelsior* and *Comœdia* of the 7 December:

TEN YEARS AFTER

THE CONSECRATION OF GENIUS

by the initial snub

On 7 December 1922, Locus Solus was greeted by boos at the Théâtre Antoine. Today, the intellectual élite considers Raymond Roussel to be one of the foremost human brains of his time.

* Book prices in 1932: *Impressions d'Afrique*, *La Doublure*, *Locus Solus*, *Pages Choisies*: 12F; *La Vue*: 6F; *L'Etoile au Front*, *La Pousière de Soleils*: 9F; *Chiquenaude*: 1F.

It is a law that genius is never
Welcomed like an expected guest...

wrote Jean Richepin. No one more than Raymond Roussel has better proved this eternal truth, for which striking examples have been provided in the world of music by such immortal masterpieces as *Faust*, *Carmen*, *Tannhäuser*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and in the world of literature by *Hernani*. Today, the greatest authors and the greatest critics have hailed Raymond Roussel's genius — so deeply imbibed with classicism — and the new literary generation considers his monumental *œuvre* to be an inexhaustible source from which whole generations of writers will drink. There is a "Rousselian universe", there is a "Rousselian cult", there are "Roussel-worshippers". Those that stubbornly continue to deny his genius are growing rarer. Because of their extraordinarily compact thought, his books are among the few which Paul Morand takes with him during his explorations,* and the Master Marcel Prévost observed: "Raymond Roussel has the courage to aim extremely high and ask his talent to achieve what may be beyond the scope of human language."

When one's spirit is so "deeply imbibed with classicism", one can take the risk of being sent up by a "master". As *Le Petit Bleu* states, the article was illustrated by a half-tone photograph with the caption: "Portrait of Raymond Roussel, as a child, by Madeleine Lemaire."

This child's face positively makes our head spin. Because of his fear of death and old age, Roussel once more turned towards the "delicious memories" of his childhood, when he had experienced "perfect happiness". And it was from one of his mother's friends, Madeleine Lemaire, who had died four years before in 1928, that he requested the proof.

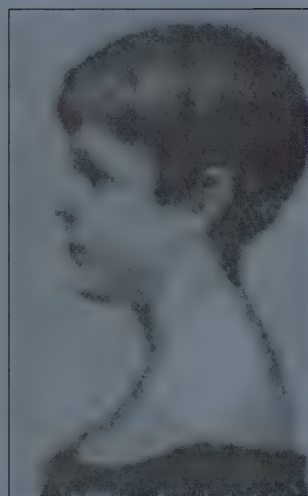
This last desperate attempt to have his genius recognised was mocked once again. After the puffs in the press, Rip (Georges Thenon) published a long ballad called "*Le Progrès s'amuse*" in *Paris-Soir* with the following introduction:

M. Raymond Roussel, the cranky author of *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*, has recently sent out a press release "proclaiming" his genius [*sic*].

He continued to poke fun at Roussel's claims for eight whole verses.

Even his most enthusiastic readers were reticent. After thanking Raymond Roussel for having sent him "this unique book", Raymond Queneau published a review of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* in *La Critique sociale* of January 1933 (no. 7) under the title: "*Raymond Roussel: Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique, Impressions d'Afrique*":

The seventh book published by Raymond Roussel will probably encounter as little success as the previous ones, and, in the first of the two works considered here, certain "eccentricities" of presentation will no doubt put off the superficial reader who will platitudinously content himself by finding it all completely absurd. It is certainly better to recommend the old rather than the new *Impressions* to people who wish to become acquainted with Raymond Roussel's astonishing *œuvre*.



* Paul Morand's "explorations" were taken directly from an article by Jacques Sylvain in *La Rampe*, and which was included in the booklet of quotations of 1932: "According to an article by Jacques-Émile Blanche, which recently appeared in *Le Figaro*, in order not to overburden himself Paul Morand takes on his explorations only the main works by four or five great authors, among whom Raymond Roussel rubs shoulders with Racine."

An implacable imagination, methodical in form and unhinged in the elements it employs; an imagination capable of making its most flagrant liberties lucid, but without making any concessions to what is alien to it; an imagination which joins the mathematicians' delirium to the poets' logic — this, among other marvels, is what one discovers in the novels of R. Roussel, in these novels that are veritable worlds, for R. Roussel creates worlds with a potency, an originality and a verve to which, until then, God the father believed he owned the exclusive rights.*

DOCUMENTS POUR SERVIR DE CANEVAS

At the beginning of *Documents*, at the end of Roussel's posthumous work *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, a note was mistakenly reproduced which was intended for the printer (and not, of course, for the reader!):

If I die before finishing this work and if someone wishes to publish it, even though it is incomplete, I would like the beginning to be suppressed and for it to start with the FIRST DOCUMENT herewith, and that the initials [to] be replaced with names, by filling in the blanks, and for it to have the overall title: *Documents to Serve as an Outline*.

Raymond Roussel,
15 January 1932.

He does not provide the title of "this work", but we learn that the *Documents* were part of a whole, of which he wanted just "the beginning" to be cut. But this beginning had not only already been typeset by the printer, Roussel had also corrected the proofs. By removing it, he wanted to prevent us from knowing that he had written only six of the planned thirty *Documents*. Now that this beginning has been published,† we know that the novel was set in Havana. A club has been founded, whose members' assignment is to provide "appropriate testimony to Europe's superiority" in order to counteract "the crude industrialism of fledgling America". With this in mind, the club's lady president, M—, receives "a sheaf of arguments for her cause: the thirty documents which follow."

When writing *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Roussel pointed out: "The beginning of a book, constructed using the procedure, has been typeset by the Imprimerie Lemerre, 6, Rue des Bergers (an episode that takes place in Cuba)." It is thus the six pages of proofs of *À La Havane* that he had in mind, and at that moment Roussel did not seem at all to wish that they should be "suppressed". On the contrary, he even supplied the address where they could be found! However, in *How I Wrote ...*, Roussel's note is followed by a second one, this time written by the printer:

Afterwards, the author had the initial typesetting destroyed. The *Documents pour servir de canevas* [...] are the first six of a series of thirty "documents" which this book was to contain.

* "An imagination which joins the mathematicians' delirium to the poets' logic..." —Raymond Queneau is here already applying an early definition of the Oulipo and of his own work to Raymond Roussel. We know that he had not only read his work, but read and re-read Jean Ferry's *Étude* and *Autre Étude* and that, in April 1976, just before his death, in a period of mystical research, he re-read the first edition of this life of Raymond Roussel. It is also known that, in April 1955, when working for Gallimard, Raymond Queneau received a manuscript by Élie Richard entitled *Clés pour Raymond Roussel*. (The name of Élie Richard, whose sagacity has already been referred to, is included on the list dated 20 January 1933 of people due to receive a copy of *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, with his address, 14, Rue du Cloître-Notre-Dame.)

† By John Ashbery in *L'Arc*, no. 19, from the proofs which belonged to Jacques Hérold. See also *Raymond Roussel: Selections from Certain of his Books*, Atlas Press, 1991. The translation here is by John Ashbery.

We should also remark that, in *How I Wrote...*, Roussel talks of “the beginning of a book”, but does not say if the *Documents* themselves were written using the procedure as well. What is more, these *Documents* had not been polished, and were there just to “serve as an outline”. Raymond Roussel had given up the idea of filling them in before publication.

Among the manuscripts and drafts of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* are some sheets containing finished lines, in their published form, followed by words which Annie Angrémy has described as “forming a sort of homophonic continuation of the generative line”. Here, for example, are three lines from the second poem; the first is followed by eight lines, the second by six and the third by five:

Comme si choisissant la seconde opportune
Coma chinoise missile aztèque Europe rétime
 junior mastic scrutin
chromo assignat oculi stock Europe aparté
 Eginhard
cosmos vésanie macule six chasserresse cubaine
ramasse fer jaunit mal cœur civil
Comines visa lémure sire sécheresse lopin
rameau fer jaunit mal cœur civil

Un ensorcellement eût su le rendre enclin
 exilé ventru brûlure central va l’amble
Onan corpuscule ventru salure ambre à gala
 cortège vol vitre chaleur virago legs
Aînesse cartel fileuse vétéran coup double mural gelé
 surtaxes
 synthaxe obole titre couleur gelée

À prendre l’appareil qui trouvé Franklin
arpent dreclin spirale guilledou guipure frugal
oripeaux du recel paroli taille-douce gris-perle crucial*
Iris poussif qualité
Eros passif crécelle parabole qualité riche
Héroïne passif cœur seul beuverie pile déjeune gabarit Chariot.

If we did not have some inkling of Raymond Roussel’s “procedure”, as revealed in *Comment...*, we might worry about the sanity of the person who jotted down these strings of approximate homophones.

What can it all mean? What was the point? And why did Roussel operate thus on his own verses?

In *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, he indicated that some lines from *La Source* were used to generate an episode in *Locus Solus*.

We are here present at the birth of a new work: “Europe”, “Cuban”, “virago”, “cartel”, “veteran” and “spinner” [*fileuse*] are familiar words to us, for they form the

* A rare word, used in faro for a double stake.

basis of *In Havana*. The work Raymond Roussel conducted on his own poetry for *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* perhaps clarifies the title *Textes-Genèse* which he gave to certain short texts reproduced in his posthumous work. And the coherence of his life's work, from *La Doublure* to *Documents pour servir de canevas*, is perhaps to be found in this series of texts generated by texts. Each novel, each poem or play would thus generate its successor, thereby forming an infinite chain, rather like the succession of scenes in *La Poussière de Soleils*.

To recapitulate: Roussel wrote the "beginning" (*À La Havane*), had it typeset, corrected the proofs, then received six copies of the corrected proofs (as specified on the pages themselves). He then wrote, at least in part, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*. After that, he composed the first six documents. He had the typesetting of the "beginning" destroyed, but kept the proofs and, on 15 January 1932, sent the printer a note with the manuscript of the six *Documents* "herewith", and with instructions to suppress the "beginning". Finally, he finished drafting *Comment...* after June 1932, that is to say the publication date of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (he speaks of their "presentation to the public" in the past).

The literary testament of *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres* thus seems to have been written prior to 1933. Since his sister's death in 1930, the drawing-up of the will in favour of his nephew Michel Ney and the sale of his property in Neuilly in 1931, apart from two short chronicles published in the supplement of *Le Figaro* in February and April 1933, Roussel does not seem to have written anything except these disillusioned pages, in which he hopes for "a little posthumous glory", and the drafts of six chapters of a novel he was to abandon, which was in fact nearer to the *Textes-Genèse* than his great finished novels *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus*.

When he wrote in the note to the printer that "the initials [should] be replaced with names, by filling in the blanks" (which the printer seems to have done), Roussel certainly did not mean that all of the names were to be completed. The poet Pérot, for example (*Second Document*), adopts the pseudonym "Pérou" [i.e. "Peru"] because it is "gratifyingly suggestive of a richness of ideas and veins of golden rhyme".* It is obvious that here, at least, Roussel had not simply left an initial and a blank. Nor can that be the case with the name Jacqueline de Faublas, "younger sister of the famous libertine" (*Fifth Document*). All the names of Roussel's characters cannot possibly have been supplied by the printer alone. The manuscripts held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and in particular the manuscript of *Locus Solus*, which Roussel had luxuriously bound by Gruel, amply demonstrate the opposite. Before finally adopting a name, Roussel often modified or even radically altered it several times. Michel Leiris mentioned that it often took him three hours to come up with one, leaving aside Eugène Vallée's contributions. One thing is certain: on the corrected proofs of *À La Havane*, the names have not been filled in. How did Roussel choose them? Nobody has yet found a satisfactory explanation.

* The extracts from *Documents* are translated by John Ashbery.

One last remark concerning the *Documents*. It looks as though Roussel left the keys to the procedure behind in the words with double meanings that are printed in italics. For example, it would seem that in the *Third Document* the statue of the *Flimsy Red Colossus* (*Léger Colosse Rouge*), was fated to push Bernadette into sticking back the bloody bone of Ovide Torchu (*"elle recolle l'os rouge"*).

COMMENT J'AI ÉCRIT CERTAINS DE MES LIVRES

On 16 April 1932, noted Michel Leiris, Raymond Roussel gave the major part of his book to the printers, qualifying it as "secret and posthumous" in the accompanying letter which made it absolutely clear that it was to be published only after his death.

Roussel wrote:* "I have always intended to explain the way in which I wrote certain of my books."

This "always" comes as a surprise. Always, perhaps... but since when? The label stuck on the title-page of *Impressions d'Afrique* suggests that some readers were "initiated" into his art. Others still had quizzed him, such as Henri Austruy, the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue*, who wrote to Roussel on 16 October 1925:

... I persist in thinking that it would be interesting to have you write a study of your trilogy [?]. Without demanding that you reveal your "magic secrets", it would be fascinating to know, from examples furnished by your works, your starting-points and your mechanisms of production.

And Jean Cocteau remarked: "One day I asked him for the 'code' of *Impressions d'Afrique*. He answered: 'I shall explain it after my death.'"

This "explanation" did not satisfy André Breton, who found it distinctly superficial. And he is not the only one! "Is it possible that a man who is alien to all initiatory traditions should consider himself bound to take a different order of secret to the grave with him? Is it not tempting to suppose that Roussel, as an adept, was obeying some imprescriptible command?" Breton did not believe in Roussel's sincerity, and yet his intention was to be clear: "It consists in a very special procedure," he wrote, and not in any old procedure. He was so proud of his discovery that his tone is reminiscent of an inventor lodging a patent. "It seems to me that it is my duty to reveal it." This is not the voice of an initiate, but a Master who has no disciples and is transmitting his knowledge to those who will come after him. As the sole inventor of a method, he wrote in the first person singular. Perhaps, in his naïveté, he took himself for the sorcerer's apprentice. In Michel Leiris's words, "by bringing together apparently gratuitous elements, which he took on trust, he created true myths". And yet, on the contrary, perhaps he not only dissimulated the true keys to his work by apparently revealing his "procedure", but

* We have only one, incomplete manuscript of eight sheets, corresponding to pages 11, 12 and 13 in the Pauvert edition. The last sheet contains only four lines, the last word corresponding to the end of the sixth paragraph of page 13 (*"par Talou"*). There must therefore be a complete manuscript somewhere, this one being perhaps an unfinished copy.

he might even have given his readers a false lead on purpose.

In the end, what perhaps disturbed André Breton — and also many others, so he should not be accused of broadcasting what others were keeping to themselves — is this simple question: whatever does it all mean?

And what if it meant nothing at all?

We can understand the anxiety of those who have not been hardened by frequenting Mallarmé, Jarry and Lautréamont. Seekers of the absolute have rarely had the chance to peer over such an abyss. The void makes our heads spin. It is the satisfaction of nothingness.

But what was Raymond Roussel really after? Dr Pierre Janet remarked (in *De l'Angoisse à l'extase*):

It is true that Martial wrote other volumes [than *La Doublure*], but the aim was not to produce something superior to the first work; *there is no progress in the absolute, and he had achieved absolute glory at the first attempt.* [My italics]

He immediately added:

But the later volumes would push the tardy, ignorant public to read the first one and witness its splendour.

And then:

He in fact retained a second feeling, which was the intense desire, the insane hope of experiencing once again, even for five minutes, the sensations that had flooded his heart for a few months when he was nineteen [...]. He hopes that a real external success might revive that internal sensation of glory, and *that is why he tries to write new books* [my italics] and why he sometimes indulges in extravagant spectacles.

And he quoted these words of Roussel:

But what does their success or failure really matter? This only delays other people's external realisation of glory, it does not affect its reality.

We can thus wonder why, and for whom, Raymond Roussel wrote his posthumous book. If Dr Janet is to be believed (and we have no reason to disbelieve him), Roussel never wrote for his readers, but only for himself, in order to *revive a sensation*. The “posthumous glory” to which he aspired in the last years of his life is nothing other than our own recognition of his right to “glory”.

But we would be wrong to think of Roussel as simply a writer. For he sought this sensation of glory everywhere and by any means: in his “imitations” (as he himself recognised in his posthumous book), in chess where he wanted his name to be

immortalised, in pistol shooting where he won prizes, in his patent for a method of insulating buildings, in his travels in his “caravan”, of course in honours and decorations, and also in his “drugs”!

If he shut himself up at home, if he wrote obsessively, if he “bled over each sentence”, it is because his ecstasy made him solitary and all he could do was shut himself up and write. It is also because his initial sensation of glory appeared while he was writing, so the most logical way to recover it was to write, write, and never stop writing.

We can even wonder what would have happened if, just for one day, Roussel had recovered that original sensation of glory! Would he have *needed* to go on writing?

This raises further questions regarding his “procedures” — those he revealed and those he did not mention. Are they “constraints”? The word, as it is used today, is too strong. It is rather a matter of giving a fillip to the hard labour of imagination and writing. As Michel Leiris explained:

The fact of making oneself the voluntary slave of a hard and complicated rule, on which it is necessary to concentrate one’s attention and ignore one’s surroundings, causes a freeing of the unconscious which is more real than in the pure and simple abandonment of automatic writing. Perhaps because this concentration of the attention on some futile point lifts inhibitions more effectively than passivity or the attempt to empty one’s mind.

Glory had come to Roussel thanks to his ability to write verse. It was thus necessary to provoke — but artificially this time — this ability in order to recover the thrill of his ecstatic state. Hence the need to force the writing and constrain it (especially in his “procedures”) in order to attain glory once more “even if for only five minutes”. Raymond Roussel did not write *for* his readers, he *wrote* his readers.

The manuscript of *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes Livres* contains few variants. Roussel began the eighth paragraph (concerning his pairs of sentences): “The first began the tale, the second ended it”. He crossed that out and wrote: “In the first...”, and this became the final version. Later, just after the first paragraph on page six (Lemerre edition), after the date “1908” he added a new paragraph in brackets:

(At the end of the volume, publish *Chiquenaude*, *Nanon* and *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton*. One can obtain the texts of the latter two tales by having them copied or photographed* at the Bibliothèque Nationale, after leafing through the collection of *Gaulois* until they are found. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the exact dates. There is a mistake at the end of *Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton*. Instead of *mouton à cinq pattes*, please put *bouton à cinq pattes*. This parenthesis is addressed to the printer.)

* Added over the line. [The mistake mentioned later is a confusion of “sheep” (“*mouton*”) for “button” (“*bouton*”). Trans.]

Notice how much Roussel respected the work of researchers at the BN... But he was nevertheless forced to admit what he had forgotten. Not only did he not

remember the year *Chiquenaude* had been published by Alphonse Lemerre ("about 1900", he says, and Lemerre did not even bother to check), but had this collector of press cuttings, who kept a subscription to the *Argus*, not kept the issues of *Le Gaulois* in which his texts had been published? This would seem to tally with the presence of the locked trunks seen in Rue Quentin-Bauchart by his niece Nicole. He could not consult his press cuttings nor his works published in *Le Gaulois*, because they were locked up in trunks that he was never to open again, but which apparently did not end up in the furniture warehouse. On two occasions he admits: "My memory fails me...", and "I have a faulty memory".* So why did he not make the effort of opening a trunk in order to consult his papers? He wrote: "Among my papers can be found a few pages on which I clearly explain how I wrote *L'Étoile au Front* and *La Poussière de Solcils*." Such papers are certainly not insignificant. Then he mentions another unpublished work: "There can also be found an episode written immediately after *Locus Solus* and interrupted by the mobilisation of 1914, in which there is much talk of Voltaire and of a place full of fireflies; this manuscript might deserve being published." In the trunks was also the "descriptive part" of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, which he had abandoned after five years' work and about which he said: "If the manuscript is found among my papers, perhaps it will interest certain of my readers."

"There can also be found...", "If the manuscript is found...". Roussel is not very clear. But the firefly text, *L'Allée aux lucioles*, was indeed in one of the boxes discovered in the furniture warehouse.

Michel Foucault wrote that "Roussel apparently respects chronological order. He explains his works following the direct line that stretches from his early texts to *Nouvelles Impressions* which he had just published." He also observed that Roussel immediately reveals the secret of his first writings, but talks less and less about his later ones. Was this owing to fatigue, or boredom at having to write *Comment...*? Or a loss of short-term memory? This is a possible hypothesis, but does not explain why Roussel's habit had been to scatter his manuscripts in various places in sealed envelopes, in order to be sure not to lose them, which is further proof of how he mistrusted his own memory. Indeed, he sometimes forgot about these envelopes. In the succinct inventory in *Comment...*, he makes no mention of *Flio*, which was at the time still in his stockbroker's safe.

Roussel continued to use the notepaper headed "Rue Quentin-Bauchart", and when his nephew Michel Ney confirmed that he lived there until his departure for Italy, he immediately added that his uncle had been leading "a double life". We do not know where Roussel wrote *Comment...* — at Rue Quentin-Bauchart, at Charlotte Dufrène's, or else in the furnished hotel at 75, Rue Pigalle: a shabby building, the last but one before the square, and, according to Michel Leiris, Charlotte Dufrène affirmed that it was frequented by homosexuals and drug addicts.

* There is also this grammatical slip: "*cette épopée que chantes les bandes...*" [i.e. *chantes* for *chantent*, in the plural].

In that same year of 1932, he went on consulting doctors, for at the end of May, Dr B.-J. Logre, a doctor at the Préfecture de Police, wrote to Dr Laforgue saying that Raymond Roussel would “hugely benefit from a psychoanalytic cure”. A splendid idea, but wasn’t it rather late?

THE BISHOP AND KNIGHT CHECKMATE

In the article he wrote after Roussel’s death, in *L’Intransigeant* of 7 August 1933, Robert Desnos dwelt on the failure of *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*: “... this book, the fruit of so much passion, passed by almost unnoticed. It is certain that this failure saddened the last months of his life.”

Robert Desnos had made an unintentional pun on “*échec*” [“failure”, but *échecs* also means “chess”]; Raymond Queneau, on the other hand, knew that Roussel liked playing chess. “Near the end of his life,” stated Michel Ney, “he spoke to me a lot about chess... He would go to cafés... I can’t remember which ones, and play there... [...]. He was very good at chess... He was very good at games in general... He was absolutely not a mathematician, but it seems that he would have been very good at mathematics. [...] Beneath his appearance... he had a terribly logical mind...”

At the Café de la Régence, on Place du Palais-Royal, Roussel received lessons from Romih. “He had a chess teacher,” Michel Leiris noted, “who played cards. Roussel was paying off his gambling debts, saying that if his teacher found serenity in gambling, then for him, it was to settle payments.” It was here that Marcel Duchamp saw him for the first time: “He looked very ‘prim and proper’, with a high starched collar, dressed in black, altogether very ‘Avenue du Bois’. I’m not exaggerating. With great simplicity, not at all conspicuous.” As reported by Jean Schuster, Marcel Duchamp went on: “I think I forgot to introduce myself.” Despite his brother-in-law Charles Ney’s encouragement, Roussel, who belonged to just one Parisian “circle”, the Cercle Hoche et d’Anjou, thus started in 1932 to frequent the world of chess-playing. However, there are plenty of groups and clubs in his books: the “Club of Incomparables” in *Impressions of Africa*, the “intimates” in *Locus Solus* and in *The Star on the Forehead*, the “club for both sexes” in *In Havana*, and so many others. But this can no doubt be explained by the influence of Jules Verne [whose works so often feature learned societies and the like].

“In 1932, I started playing chess. After three and a half months, I discovered a method [...] for arriving at the extremely difficult bishop and knight checkmate.”

In this field, as in others, Roussel wanted to be first. In his youth, there had already been a “Roussel theorem”, and later there was a “Roussel patent”; there would now be a “Roussel method” in chess.

Tartakower,* who published the “Raymond Roussel formula” in *L’Échiquier* of

* Xavier Tartakover, or Tartakower (1887-1956), French chess-player of Russian-Polish origins, had, when Roussel met him, already won tournaments in Nuremberg (1906), Vienna (1920 and 1923), Bartfield (1926), Gand (1926), Hastings (1926-1927), Scarborough (1928), Nice (1930) and Liège (1930). At this time he was living in the Hôtel Mazagran, 4, Rue de Mazagran, Paris 10^e.

November 1932, referred to the Delétang method “with its system of triangles”. Enthusiasts will know that nobody has developed this any further, and that in fact all other approaches to the bishop and knight checkmate are only variations on the Delétang method.

When he collected the chess articles that mentioned his name in *Comment...*, Roussel was careful to write “*formule Raymond-Roussel*” with a hyphen. On the other hand, when his name occurred in contexts indicating his person (“Monsieur Raymond Roussel”), he didn’t hyphenate it. Roussel had realised the problems that might arise if there were no hyphen in the name of the formula: people would have said, and would still be saying, “*formule Roussel*”, and not “*formule Raymond-Roussel*”, and there could then have been any amount of confusion with other Roussels... He almost certainly mentioned this orthographic nicety to Tartakower, who had omitted the hyphen in his article in *L’Échiquier* of November 1932. Tartakower made amends in his subsequent articles.

It seems that the main object for Roussel (and Tartakower presumably helped him to realise this) was to find a new sign, the “cedilla”. In fact, one needs a deal of imagination to picture the knight as “a sort of cedilla”. Tartakower regaled his readers with this “magical formula”, as he twice put it, again in *L’Échiquier*, in December 1932 (actually, January 1933). In his *Quelques réflexions en marge de la formule Raymond-Roussel* (this time the hyphen is present), Tartakower notes that:

M. Raymond Roussel’s formula concerning the bishop and knight checkmate also opens up new horizons that lead towards a “co-operative strategy”, and it would be tempting to start studying the mysterious correlations that exist between the various pieces and the various squares on the chess-board.

It is good to make observations; drawing conclusions from them that can be of service to one and all is even better. In this way, it seems to me that the Raymond-Roussel Formula at last allows us to establish a *method*, where previously the frustrated player saw only more or less empirical *trials*.

This first article seems to be in answer to a letter or to reflections from an “eminent expert, known by the pseudonym ‘*Un Amateur de l’cx-U.A.A.R.*’*”, who must have analysed the problem historically. Tartakower felt obliged to defend Roussel’s formula:

... I was right to say in my previous article that it is only since the discovery of the Raymond-Roussel Formula that “the work of these three white pieces has become profoundly co-ordinated”.

What is more, may I point out that in this formula, which is as concise as it is original, an attentive mind could discover all sorts of novelties...

The adjective “concise” is accompanied by a note (dictated by Roussel!):

* The meaning of “U.A.A.R.” is unknown. [Trans.]

It is in fact above all for its *concision* that Raymond Roussel's style shines forth in his novels. "Raymond Roussel has the courage to aim extremely high and ask his talent to achieve what may be beyond the scope of human language", wrote Marcel Prévost.

"... the magic of language seems to have been injected there, one might say, with full force," wrote another literary critic in *L'Événement*.

For us chess-players, it is certainly interesting to note that several critics can see the approach of a chess-player in Raymond Roussel's style!

There was nothing more to add. Raymond Roussel could now consider himself to be the inventor of a decisively new formula resulting in an "elegant checkmate *par excellence*".*

Roussel, Tartakower and Romih met regularly at the Régence and in Parisian circles. In the "Curious Endgames" section of *L'Échiquier* of February 1933 (in fact published on 23 March) appears "The Duel of Kings", with the subtitle: "analytical endgame, played in Paris in January 1933", thereby indicating to the initiated that it was not a complete game, but a problem Roussel had set Romih... against the usual remuneration which the master asked of this pupils. The words "game drawn" that appear at the end of the list of moves are rather euphemistic: Roussel could hardly win a game when he had asked Romih to solve a problem.†

The article finishes as follows:

To quote M. Raymond Roussel, the squares (especially in endgames with just pawns) represent *time projected into space*.

It was at this time that François Le Lionnais, who had long been a Roussel-worshipper, received an enthusiastic letter‡ from him. Le Lionnais replied in similar terms. And, as he had just become editor-in-chief of *Les Cahiers de l'Échiquier français* (as of issue number 33, dated January/February 1933), he asked Tartakower to write an article on "Raymond Roussel and Chess in Literature".

After mentioning those writers who had shown an interest in chess, Tartakower added:

A fine acquisition to our world can be celebrated in the person of the great contemporary Surrealist writer Raymond Roussel, who has revealed himself to be a great chess thinker by devising such a simple formula concerning checkmates using the bishop and the knight.

So Roussel had now definitively become a "Surrealist writer"! Tartakower once again demonstrated the "Raymond-Roussel Formula" (the "cedilla" here becomes a "sort of centaurian figure") and then finished his article as follows:

a few details concerning the literary works of Raymond Roussel, [...] the author of several strange works whose imaginative power is above all based on a new conception of movement. Raymond Roussel is more and more considered to be the precursor and head of the Surrealist

* Tartakower mentioned Raymond Roussel (he was careful not to forget his first name) once more in his *Bréviaire des Échecs*, 1936.

† Inscriptions: *Locus Solus*, "to the great champion Max Romi [*sic*] with all the admiration of his pupil"; *La Poussière de Soleils*, "to M. Max Romih, a token from a very minor chess-player to a very great chess-player". To Tartakower, Roussel sent a copy of *Locus Solus* with a dedicatory letter.

‡ This letter vanished during the German Occupation when the Gestapo searched François Le Lionnais's Parisian home at 24, Rue du Champs-de-Mars.

school in general, or of his own school, for there is a "Rousselian universe", a "Rousselian cult" and even "Roussel-worshippers".

He once again cited Marcel Prévost, René Lalou ("a concision that does not exclude a richness of language that the literary critic René Lalou has called 'disconcerting'") and Jean Richepin ("Raymond Roussel, the courageous searcher and discoverer of the new"). Such was, in Tartakower's view, "this great literary figure who is also a remarkable chess figure".

The first issues of *L'Échiquier* and *Les Cahiers de l'Échiquier* for 1933 contain the final allusions to Raymond Roussel's chess-playing activities. His last chess-board is the vault with thirty-two cells in Père-Lachaise cemetery, which he purchased in September 1931 — half a board, becoming a complete one in a mirror.

On 24 December 1932, Raymond Roussel attended midnight mass at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette with his "little friends" from the furnished hotel at 75, Rue Pigalle. Every year, Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris, he went with her to see the Christmas crib, the wayside altars on Good Friday, and would often attend high mass on Easter Sunday.

He wrote to Michel Leiris, who was still in Africa:

Page 297:

An ill-painted hamlet is seen
At the rear of the theatre,
Where a herdsman slowly walks on
Whistling tunes with his recorder.

Written for

Michel Leiris

by his very grateful,

Raymond Roussel.

December 1932.

To the Jannets:

Page 257:

And the air indeed breaks apart;
The cannon-blasts now make the sky
Roar, which pushes the men in the port
To wheel their guns out to reply.

Written for Monsieur and Madame G.J. Jannet with the sincerest thanks and very best wishes of a very old friend.

6 January 1933.

Raymond Roussel.

From the beginning, Raymond Roussel lived his life alone. He passed through events without becoming involved in them. All he seems to have noticed in the

1914-18 war was the number of men taking part. When he went to the theatre, his seat was in a box which isolated him from the stalls. Young and admiring writers were buzzing around him, but he did not understand them. He shut himself up in solitude and silence to pick over the puns in his prose and set the rhymes of his verse. Raymond Roussel had no friends, or at least he makes no mention of any in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, except for his brother-in-law's relations, because they had prestigious names!

That is why it is all the more surprising to come across his hidden friendships, more often in the inscriptions of his books than in the correspondence he received. Who, for example, was Mme Sorlin? In February 1933, he transcribed a quatrain into a copy of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* on Japanese vellum with these words: "Written for Madame Sorlin by a very respectful and very old friend. Raymond Roussel. February 1933." And, with regard to the short booklet "Criticism and Raymond Roussel", he added: "Dear Madame, do not bother to read these comments, they are exactly the same as, etc.". The tone Roussel used with Mme Sorlin is not particularly familiar, nor is it the one he used with his many doctors; nor does any form of condescension lead us to suppose that she had been one of the Roussels' servants. So, who was she? Her heirs, if there are any left, would certainly be incapable of telling us, for they sold off her books.*

On Wednesday 18 January, Roussel lodged an envelope with his lawyer, Maître Constantin, marked: "to be opened two weeks after my death":

I hereby cancel the previous letter in which I stated my desire that a poem entitled *Mon Âme*, which was published in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche* on 12 July 1897, be republished after my death. The poem in fact appears in my book *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.

18 January 1933.

Raymond Roussel.

He had a second "third edition" printed of his book. This time the cover and the title-page state: "FOLLOWED BY / *L'Âme de Victor Hugo* / (page 241)", which he had added in writing on the copies inscribed in October 1932. On these two pages the date MDCCCCXXXII remained unchanged, but the eight-page inset at the end was modified. It now had the publication date "1933" and the number 6933.

RAYMOND ROUSSEL'S WILL

In the same envelope, Roussel also lodged with his lawyer what he called his "will", on stamped paper. In fact, it was not a valid will in the full legal sense. His real will, dating from 6 February 1931, named his nephew Michel Ney as his sole heir. Ney later told Jean Chatard: "In his will... he didn't have a penny left, he apologised to me saying: 'Look, I'm sorry, but I haven't left you a penny... this has been one of

* Bibliothèque Jacques Matarasso, Drouot sale, 28 April 1994.

my major failings and I apologise to you for it...'; so he obviously knew that he was going to die." This new will contains a few last arrangements, in particular concerning Charlotte Dufrène, his own funeral and his posthumous book.

Regarding the latter, we learn that, so far as Roussel was concerned, it was not one book but two. By this point he had given up for good any idea of writing the thirty *Documents*, but he was planning to have the *Documents pour servir de canevas* that had already been written published separately. According to him, these two books had already been printed, since he claims that they were in his publisher's "stock". What this must mean is that they had either been typeset, or were then being set. Roussel did not know the hour of his death, but he supposed that, when it came, his publisher would have had time to print and bind his book. However, his understanding would not be borne out, for the two books became one, presumably to save money. He made further arrangements himself at the end of May, but without modifying the "will" he had left with his lawyer:

This is my will.

I warmly recommend to the generosity of my nephew Michel Ney, Duc d'Elchingen, Mademoiselle Frédez, known as Charlotte Dufrène, 47, Rue Pierre-Charron, who has been my friend since 1910. (I desire that Mademoiselle Frédez, known as Charlotte Dufrène, be informed of the above lines.)

I warmly recommend to the generosity of my nephew all those persons who are in my service at the time of my death or who have been pensioned. (I desire that those persons who are in my service at the time of my death or who have been pensioned be informed of the above lines.)*

I desire an extremely simple funeral. No flowers or wreaths. No photograph, or effigy of the dead.

I desire that a copy of each of my books entitled, one, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, and two, *Documents pour servir de canevas* be sent to the following gentlemen:

Robert Desnos 6 Rue Lacretelle — Paul Éluard 3 Rue Ordener — Paul Reboux 24 Rue Montpensier — Tristan Tzara care of monsieur Paul Eluard 3 Rue Ordener — Michel Leiris 12 Rue Wilhem — Fernand Gregh 25 Hameau Boulainvilliers — André Breton 42 Rue Fontaine — Jacques-Émile Blanche 19 Rue du Docteur-Blanche — Henry Bidou 26 Rue de Babylone — René Char 9 Rue Considérant — Louis Laloy at *L'Ère Nouvelle* 53 Rue de Rome — Salvador Dalí 7 Rue Gauguet — René Lalou 6 Rue de Seine — André Gide 1 *bis* Rue de Varenne or 1 *bis* Rue Vaneau — Philippe Soupault 4 Avenue Erlanger — Louis Aragon 21 Rue Saint-Pierre Neuilly-sur-Seine — Marceau Bellaunay 78 Avenue des Ternes — Claude Balleroy 6 Rue Stanislas — Jean-Loup Cohen 77 Rue de Lille — Baron Jean Pellenc 1 Avenue du Maréchal-Maunoury — Élie Richard 14 Rue du Cloître-Notre-Dame — Edmond Jaloux 65 Rue de l'Université.

These two books are in stock at the publishing house Alphonse Lemerre, 23-33, Passage Choiseul. I also desire that they be issued for sale after my death.

To the Bibliothèque Nationale, Rue de Richelieu, I bequeath all of my books that have been printed on parchment and as many as it requires of those printed on Japanese vellum.

[Friday] 20 January 1933.

Raymond Roussel.

* This concerns mostly the former domestics at the property in Neuilly. He mentions no names, which was to cause some problems between his chauffeur and his heir. From different sources, especially Roussel's letters to Pierre Leiris, we know that he had pensioned off Mme Cassellari, who had served Roussel from 1911 to 1931, and M. Féodoroff, but also the Gastebleds, widow Aubin and, if they were still alive in 1933, his chauffeur Antoine Bardet, Eugénie Clerc, M. Henri the cook, the valet M. Paul and Pierre Tremblay, his butler.

The manuscript of his posthumous book(s) was lodged with his lawyer.

According to an undated letter written from Rue Quentin-Bauchart, it would seem that the copy of this manuscript (the beginning of *Comment...*) had not yet been given to the printer. He wrote on the envelope of this letter: * "I desire that two weeks after my death this envelope be given collectively to Messieurs" [?]. It was certainly never posted, for several reasons: firstly, because it seems to come from among the papers Michel Ney discovered after his uncle's death, but even more so because it would be difficult to give it "collectively" to those "*confrères*" who are evidently the same twenty-odd people mentioned in the will we have just seen, and who were supposed to receive copies of his book. We cannot resist thinking that his "*confrères*" were none other than his young Surrealist friends — Robert Desnos, Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara, Michel Leiris, André Breton, René Char, Salvador Dalí and Louis Aragon, who formed a group (but why not Jean Cocteau, Roger Vitrac and others he forgot in his will?) — rather than the handful of independent critics he mentions. In any case, he seems to have been thinking along similar lines to Alfred Jarry when the latter said: "There is everything to be said for writing a theory after having written a work, and for reading it before reading the work itself."

My dear *confrères*,

Remembering the kindness which you were good enough to display towards my books, I thought that you would be interested to discover the special procedure that I used for writing certain of them — this procedure is explained in the enclosed manuscript. An identical manuscript has been lodged with my lawyer, Monsieur Constantin, 9, Rue Boissy-d'Anglas, and I have bequeathed to my publisher Lemerre, 23-33, Passage Choiseul, enough money to have it printed. But a manuscript can become lost, either wholly or partly. If that should happen to the manuscript lodged with my lawyer, I am counting on your goodness to lend this one, so that the book can come out as planned.†

Confraternally yours.

Raymond Roussel.

In the will he lodged on 20 January, to be opened two weeks after his death, Roussel mentions an arrangement his heirs would have needed to know about immediately after his death if they were going to carry it out, and not a fortnight later. Realising this, on the same day he repeated the following words on stamped paper, this time in an envelope marked: "to be opened at once after my death":

I desire an extremely simple funeral. No flowers or wreaths. No photograph, or effigy of the dead.

20 January 1933.

Raymond Roussel.

* The first pages of the draft of *Comment...*, already referred to, and which have the same origin, are perhaps the beginning of a copy Roussel stopped making. These documents can no longer be consulted because they seem to have gone astray.

† This perhaps explains why Roussel scattered his manuscripts around in envelopes lodged with trustworthy people, or in safes — "a manuscript can become lost".

This fear of a funereal photograph should not surprise us coming as it does from someone who wanted to be remembered with the face of a young man.

When Michel Leiris returned from Africa, landing in Marseilles on 17 February 1933, one of his first visits was to Roussel.

Thursday.

My dear Michel,

I am so sorry I missed you on the telephone. Would you like to come as usual to Mme Dufrène's? Would, for example, Wednesday at 6.00 suit you? I shall be delighted to congratulate you on your extraordinary expedition.

Affectionately,

Raymond Roussel.

"He received me at Charlotte Dufrène's, on Rue Pierre-Charron, as he always did since leaving his house in Neuilly. [Other undated letters to Michel Leiris confirm this; exceptionally, one of them fixed a rather late time: "Wednesday evening at 8.15".] Dressed in an extremely dark grey suit, verging on black, he was wearing his *Légion d'honneur*. [...] He had had his moustache shaved off; still elegant and handsome, but rather drowsy, hunched up and speaking as though from a great distance. He had not seen me for two years and one after another asked for news about a great number of relations and friends of the family. A melancholy reflection (with a smile) about life: 'It goes by more and more quickly!' After I had taken leave of him, he accompanied me into the ante-room and we remained there standing and conversing for a long time (this was a habit of his — out of shyness? a fear of seeming to eject visitors? anxiety at being alone? — to detain visitors long after having said farewell). During my last visit, when I asked him if he was writing, he replied: 'It's so difficult!'"*

Roussel thus avoided telling Michel Leiris that he had already given up carrying on with his *Documents*.

"It was extremely difficult to get him to talk about his own work. From time to time a sentence... but in a sustained way was out of the question. His confidante, Charlotte Dufrène, had mentioned this idiosyncrasy to me, and I experienced it directly. He had a way to prevent people from asking him potentially annoying questions, I mean about his work. What he did was to speak first! He asked for news about all sorts of subjects! The last time I saw him, he asked me for news about all the members of my family and of those family friends whom he knew, which was quite grotesque... This was because I had tried to question him!"†

So, it was all over. Roussel had stopped writing. Or had he?

Michel Leiris noted that, according to Charlotte Dufrène: "He wrote an article for *Le Figaro* towards the end of his life in which he said that [Henry] Bataille's plays were 'bombastic'. *Lc Figaro* turned it down. He detested Bataille. Finally it was published in the supplement of *Lc Figaro* because fewer people read it [?]."

Why did Leiris not write anything about this article? And why wasn't he interested in this new piece by Roussel? In fact, it was not "an article", but two, and they were published in the monthly *Figaro illustré* in February and April 1933.‡ Did Roussel write them himself, or did he dictate them, and if so to whom? Contrary to

* Micel Leiris *Roussel l'ingénu*.† *Ibid.*

‡ Rediscovered and published by Jeanine Parisier-Plottel in *Europe*, no. 714, October 1988. Her introduction states: "There is no doubt about this attribution to the author of *Locus Solus*: the allusion to his sister would be proof enough. What is more, the style is almost a caricature of Roussel. We find here the tone and opinions that characterise certain letters and the autobiographical pages of *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*. Such abundant proof may even cast some doubt over the authenticity of these articles, although there is no firm evidence to support this." Michel Leiris's (unpublished) note of Charlotte Dufrène's words removes any lingering doubts.

the generally held view that he was extremely weak at this time, in February Roussel must surely have attended Saint-Georges de Bouhélier's *Napoléon* (première at the Odéon on 22 February 1933), and the revival of Maurice Donnay's *Éducation de prince* on 10 November 1932, at the same theatre.

The first of these articles has an aggressive title:

ADMIRATIONS AND LOATHINGS

By Raymond Roussel

In it, Roussel speaks of "two particularly happy events": the election of Georges Lenôtre, "that super-Michelet", to the Académie française on 1 December 1932, and the award of the title *Commandeur de la Légion d'honneur* to Roland Dorgelès. He praises Paul Reboux's novels (a case of mutual support?). "On the other hand, I was distinctly bored when recently attempting to re-read Henry Bataille's *La Vierge folle*. To be sure, not a single line of Bataille's plays will endure that is not mere bombast. But after all, one must not be too demanding and expect a masterpiece (yes, a masterpiece) such as Francis de Croisset's *Il était une fois* to appear every day." He concludes by praising Abel Hermant: "Without doubt, *Le Cavalier Miserey* will outlive Paris."

The second article gives the impression that Roussel did not intend to stop there. The title he chose suggests that, for the first time [?], he was considering a career as a critic or columnist:

CHRONICLE

By Raymond Roussel

This article contains much less "loathing"! Instead, there is Henry Bidou, "whose incomparable universality is one of the problems of our time" (wherever did he get such ideas?); the "fireworks of that bewitching dialogue" in Maurice Donnay's play; Gérard d'Houville, whose name he cannot mention without thinking of those "spellbinding verses of Henri de Régnier" (he had plenty of praise to go round); and the amazement he feels at Gabriel Hanotaux, "whom my poor sister Germaine d'Elchingen was fortunate enough to know personally", and so on. Jeanine Parisier-Plottel remarks: "These pages feature no examination, summary or analysis. [...] Generally, the criticisms are favourable [...]. In fact, Roussel was grossly flattering to living authors. [...] However, poor Henry Bataille was the only one to receive a particularly denigrating appreciation. He had died in 1922, and there was no risk in attacking him. Contrary to usual practice, [Roussel] started up a polemic with a corpse, as though with a living person, while his contemporaries were all treated to panegyrics."

This remark is severe, but fair. For in his correspondence, rather than his "chronicles", Raymond Roussel had always flattered the authors to whom he wrote,

even to the extent of flagrant toadying. The articles in the *Figaro illustré* prove that he retained this aspect of his character until the end.

Let us also be frank as regards the readers of the *Figaro illustré*. Raymond Roussel's short articles were completely devoid of any interest for them. We may even wonder why they were accepted by the editor. Having been turned down by the daily paper, they were then handed over to the monthly. But why? And how? Roussel had already paid *Le Gaulois* to publish his works, and knew he had to do likewise for the "puffs" for his plays, so he must have accepted the same terms once again. But it is difficult to imagine him taking the necessary steps with the *Figaro*.

On Thursday 9 March, on his headed notepaper and in an envelope marked "to be opened *immediately* after my death", Roussel expressed a further wish, which shows his anxiety about dying:

I insist *absolutely** that a *long†* incision be made in the vein in my wrist to avoid any risk of being buried alive.

Raymond Roussel.

9 March 1933.

Je tiens essentiellement à ce qu'on
me fasse une longue incision à ma
veine du poignet pour ne pas risquer
d'être enterré vivant.

Raymond Roussel

9 Mars 1933

Raymond Roussel certainly knew that Pierre Loti had had the same fear, and asked to be left in his coffin for a long time before being interred.

On 3 May he resigned from the Cercle Hoche et d'Anjou, 22, Rue Daru, of which he was a permanent member and where he presumably met other chess-players.

The sixth issue of *Lc Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* was dated "15 May 1933" — if Roussel received it before leaving, then he would have noticed that the Surrealists had not forgotten him. This time it was Salvador Dalí's turn to write about Roussel. After declaring, in his *Notes-Communications*, that the fake meteors in the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle were paranoiac phenomena, and that it would one day be possible to make love with a woman's conical anamorphosis, he devoted twenty-seven lines to *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*:

This is, among all the books of our time, the most "poetically ungraspable", and by consequence the one with the greatest future. Metaphor has been sublimely belittled and here verges on "mental deficiency". The comparisons made proceed from the most immediate and direct resemblances, anecdotic and accidental, and thus the hundreds of successive elements that are compared make us witness the obscurest and most impenetrable conflicts that have ever existed. We must inevitably consider the succession of "composed elements" as *relations*, because they proceed coherently and offer us, at first sight, some extremely obvious obsessive

* Word underlined twice.

† Word underlined once.

constants: repetitions of fried eggs, multiple allusions to the smell of urine after eating asparagus, and so on. The irrational content is proved — and becomes impossible to contradict — by the universe of elementary relationships, whose degree of objectivity is experimentally demonstrable. It is by the systematic, infinite use of this mechanism of microscopic associations that are impossible to contradict, which is destined to “bring out” the obsessive and crazy content when it comes to the choice of the elements compared, that *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique* seems to us to be the ideal itinerary for new paranoiac phenomena.

The choice of illustrations once more displays Raymond Roussel’s genius.

What can Roussel have thought of these allusions to “mental deficiency”, “obsessive constants”, eggs and urine,* and that “ideal itinerary for new paranoiac phenomena”? Did his young friends also take him for a madman? On the other hand, it is true that only a painter could have complimented him on his choice of Henri Zo for his illustrator. Perhaps Roussel also knew that Dalí frequently cited his name in his “audacious slogans”, such as:

Roussel versus Rimbaud, modern-style object versus African object, *trompe l’œil* versus plastic, imitation versus interpretation.†

On 22 May 1933, Raymond Roussel asked the Établissements Lecreux to lay a wreath of natural flowers, costing five hundred francs, on the tomb of Marshal Ney in Père-Lachaise cemetery, where the Duchesse d’Elchingen was also buried. He had no doubt done likewise every year since his sister’s death on 22 May 1930.

That same day, Roussel, who could never resist a petitioner, lent three hundred francs to Paul Fort, who promised to pay him back on 31 August. But by then, Roussel would have already been dead for one and a half months. Since the promise of the “Prince of Poets”, written out on a sheet of paper, was not lodged with Roussel’s lawyer, it seems improbable that he went to the trouble of honouring this debt to the dead.

On 20 May, in confirmation of a desire expressed in his will of 20 January,‡ Roussel wrote with a quill pen on the flyleaves of his own personal copies of his books, printed on parchment and bound by Gruel, in their white dust-jackets, the following words that later probably saved them from destruction:

I bequeath this book printed on parchment to the Bibliothèque Nationale Rue de Richelieu Paris.
20 May 1933 Raymond Roussel.

But two of these books, *Impressions d’Afrique* and *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*,§ have the manuscript date of 30 May, which perhaps suggests that Roussel had to wait for them to be returned by the binder, or more likely that he had to look for them in the trunks, or else wait for them to be found and brought to

* “I shall be very pleased to find out, when others have studied and solved the problem, what dams broke inside him resulting in such streams of foul-smelling liquid.” Jean Ferry, *Une Étude*.

† Salvador Dalí, *Vie secrète de Salvador Dalí*, 1952.

‡ See the second note to p.100 above.

§ This copy was “trimmed” by the binder (the pages have thus been cut), which seems to contradict the hypothesis of J.-B. Brunius, Michel Leiris and Jean Ferry that the pages of this book should not be cut by the reader, who must first read the text, then examine the illustrations. Unless it was a mistake on the binder’s part, or Roussel agreed to conform to normal practice.

him, for, on closer inspection, it seems that they were bound *after* being inscribed: the lines begin almost within the binding, where it would have been impossible to write normally with a pen. And it was these two very books that were the last to arrive at the BN. It is thus not unlikely that they were delivered to Michel Ney after the writer's death, which would explain their presence in the family house rather than among Roussel's personal papers. But there are so many possible hypotheses!

On 30 May, Roussel made his final arrangements in Paris. He bought a large porcelain dinner service. We do not know who this sumptuous gift was for, probably Michel Ney and his wife. That same day, he sent a series of four notes to the Imprimerie Lemerre to establish at last the contents of his posthumous book. It was to include his photograph, an essay entitled *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, the *Citations documentaires* (among which are *Chiquenaude*, the tales and poems published in *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, and passages concerning them), extracts from Dr Janet's book, four texts concerning Roussel's chess-playing activities, seventeen *Textes de grande jeunesse ou Textes-Genèse*, and the six *Documents pour servir de canevas*.

In another note to Eugène Vallée, he asked him to fetch his photograph from Otto et Pirou. It was to appear

at the front of *all* my posthumous reissues.
30 May 1933. Raymond Roussel.

However, Roussel was guarded when it came to his photographs. In 1929, Michel Leiris had asked him for one to illustrate his article in *Documents*. Roussel evaded the question, and Leiris apologised to Charlotte Dufrène for his request on 20 September.

In 1933, Roussel hesitated. He first chose "my photograph at eighteen years of age", which shows him sitting nonchalantly, hands in pockets, his face fuller and his moustache less bushy than in the one taken when he was nineteen in Milan (?), at the time he was writing *La Doublure*.

As he now knew that he could count on Charlotte Dufrène, and now relied on her entirely, it is her name that appears at the front of his last book:

To my friend
CHARLOTTE DUFRÈNE

"Friend" [*"amic"*], is the word he had already used in his will: "my friend since 1910". It is less redolent of a Platonic friendship than of a mistress, or even a kept woman. It would seem that, in his will, Roussel took a sly pleasure in playing on the word's ambiguity by emphasising the length of their relationship (twenty-three years!) in order to force his nephew's hand a little. But, by dedicating his last book



ma photo à 18 ans

Raymond Roussel

Mai 1933

"My photograph at eighteen years of age."

to her, he was also assuring her a morganatic widowhood in full view of all his family.

These decisions were made on 30 May, the day before Roussel's departure for Italy, and thus show that he wanted to put everything in order before leaving on a journey from which he would not return. If his death was not voluntary, then he was still expecting it. However, he did not think that it would be so soon, as the date on the IOU from Paul Fort demonstrates.

Yet nothing proves that, before leaving, it was *he* who placed boxes (?) of his manuscripts, family photos and personal papers in a furniture warehouse (though apparently without any books from his library, or objects, paintings or clothes).

DEATH IN PALERMO

Driven by a chauffeur, Raymond Roussel and Charlotte Dufrène arrived in Palermo on 3 or 4 June. They stayed in the Grande Albergo e delle Palme, and there it was that Raymond Roussel was to die.

Ah! Happy Palermo whose perfume makes us tipsy,
 Woman in your beauty, a queen in your splendour,
 When saying farewell, the heart alas breaks!
 It is so good to love beneath your enchanting sky!*

Raymond Roussel's death was "mysterious" for his contemporaries because it occurred abroad at a time when methods of communication were not what they are today. To clarify the situation, it was necessary to interview people then present, and also to examine the questions asked by the police while looking into the suspicious death of a foreigner in a hotel. This is what Mauro de Mauro and Leonardo Sciascia did. The latter met the last three witnesses — Dr Michele Lombardo, Gaetano Orlando, a hotel employee, and Bertolino, the barber. Most importantly, he photocopied file number 6425 at the registry of the Questure in Palermo, which contains all the papers concerning the investigation into Raymond Roussel's death. He published most of this information with great precision. We can consider the writings of Sciascia, Michel Leiris and Mauro de Mauro as reliable sources.

The Grande Albergo e delle Palme was well known because Richard Wagner stayed there on the first floor while he was composing *Parsifal*, as did Francesco Crispi in 1889. But it was on the second floor that Raymond Roussel and Charlotte Dufrène took rooms, 226 for him, 227 for his "housekeeper" as the receptionist who had met them told Michel Leiris in 1963, thirty years after the event. In fact, Charlotte Dufrène had room number 226, which communicates with room 224 (now 225), above the

* *Palerme*, a romance, with words by L. Tabarre and J. Grancey, music by Alfred d'Hack, sung by Mlle Juana at the Eldorado.

corner of Via Ricardo Wagner and Via Mariano Stabile, with a balcony overlooking this rather noisy street. Roussel entrusted himself to her totally. He deposited nothing at the hotel, but on their arrival his friend put a sum of 25,000 francs in the safe.*

Feeling very tired after the journey, Roussel asked for his first meal to be served in his room, and kept this habit up until the end. Raymond Roussel and Charlotte Dufrène lunched together, served by Orlando, but Charlotte later dined alone since Roussel had just one meal a day, for eating, he said, "disturbed his serenity". The writer and his "housekeeper", whom the hotel staff called his mistress (*"amante"*), lived in perfect harmony.

On about 15 June, a few days after their arrival, Roussel asked Charlotte Dufrène to return to Paris and dismiss his domestics (whom he paid off liberally), empty his flat, to bring back some possessions, and probably money. He told her that he was now intending to travel with her, and would not be going back to Paris for a long time. The climate in Palermo was mild and perfectly suited his health.

The day after Charlotte Dufrène's departure, the chambermaid, Dora Chierici, answered a summons from the bell to find the occupant of room 224 lying unconscious on his bed. She informed the manager of the hotel, Leopoldo Serena, who called in the hotel doctor, Michele Lombardo (who was then thirty-seven). He found Raymond Roussel completely unconscious, noticed the bottles of Véronal and Neurinase and realised that this was a case of barbiturate overdose. He bled the patient, gave him an injection of glucose, a bladder probe and an emergency enema.

He obtained rapid results. Forty-eight hours later, Roussel had recovered. When Charlotte Dufrène returned from Paris a few days afterwards, she told Dr Lombardo that Roussel had been abusing barbiturates for the last two years. But it was pointless trying to talk him round, for the slightest decrease in the dose made him irascible. He would have preferred to lose an arm and a leg rather than be deprived of his poison. "Cut," he would say, "amputate, only give me my drugs!" For he had finally found the perfect "euphoria".

According to Dr Lombardo: "He was in a constant state of intoxication, because he took large doses of drugs very day." But Roussel had told his own doctor, too, that it was impossible for him to reduce the dose. He made no attempt to hide what he was doing, and the room-servant Kreuz often found empty bottles in the wastepaper bin, where Roussel or Charlotte Dufrène had thrown them.

But it was only in 1961 that Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris that the main purpose of her trip to Paris was to fetch barbiturates, which she hid under the mattress in her sleeping-car. At first, she was supposed to give them to him in small quantities but, as she disliked rationing him, she foolishly (as she herself admitted) gave him everything she had brought back.

Dr Lombardo's intervention did have an effect on Roussel. He had until then been intoxicating himself in a disorderly manner with practically whatever lay to

* L. Sciascia calculated that this was equivalent to 19,275 lira, and that a civil servant's family at the time lived on 600 lira per month. All of this information comes from interviews with the hotel staff; the hotel registers were unfortunately destroyed during the American occupation of Sicily.

hand. Michele Lombardo initially convinced him to use only those barbiturates and sleeping pills that suited him the best. "During our twenty-three years together," said Charlotte Dufrène, "I never argued with M. Roussel. For his own good, I begged him to stop taking drugs, but, to avoid making him angry, I let him do as he wished." She even added that he had never drunk much, and that the little wine or spirits he did take greatly "excited" him.

On 25 June, Charlotte Dufrène followed Dr Lombardo's recommendations and started keeping a daily log of the drugs Roussel was taking, their quantity and especially their effect. On a sheet of blue paper, she wrote the date in the left-hand column, from Sunday 25 June to Thursday 20 July. Thus, for one month, Raymond Roussel, Charlotte Dufrène and Dr Michele Lombardo would be able to judge the effects of various barbiturates and act accordingly.

This sheet, which was seized by the police after Roussel's death, makes impressive reading:

Sunday 25 June. — 6.00 p.m. 6 Phanodorme 6 at about 1.30 a.m.

Monday 26 — 8 Hypalène at 5.10 — then 2 + 4 at 9.30 and 30 in all during the night.

Tuesday 27 — 1½ bottles of Vérianne.

Wednesday 28 — 3 Rutonal at 4.30 — 3 at 6.00. 18 in all without sleep (about 3.00).

Thursday 29 — 4 Sonéryl at 5.00 — 4 at 6.30 sleep at 10.00 and 13 during the night, slept 12¼ hours, extra euphoria. 24 hours.

Friday 30 — 19 Somnothyryl without euphoria — Sleep about 6.00.

Saturday 1 July — 1 bottle Neurinase.

Sunday 2 — 1 bottle Acetile.

Monday 3 — 10 Phanodorme and 4 new med.

Tuesday 4 — 1½ bottles Vérianne and ½ Neurinase.

Wednesday 5 — 2 bottles Véronidin.

Thursday 6 — 16 Sonéryl — Sleep 9½ hours — Very great euphoria.

Friday 7 — Hypalène 9.30 p.m. — 6 — 18 and 3 Sonéryl good euphoria.

Saturday 8 — 20 Somnothyryl — 1 bottle Neurinase. No lunch. Euphoria all day.

Sunday 9 — 11 Phanodorme.

Monday 10 — Véronidin 9.00. 2 bottles. Slept well.

Tuesday 11 — Rutonal 9.00 = 34 — 3 hours' sleep wonderful euphoria.

Wednesday 12 — Vérianne. 1½ bottles sleep; confused euphoria.

Thursday 13 — Sonéryl.

Friday 14 —

Saturday 15 —

Sunday 16 —

Monday 17 —

Tuesday 18 —

Wednesday 19 —

Thursday 20 —

This log requires some comment. It will be noticed that, in three weeks, Roussel had already reduced his "drugs" from eight to six, then to five favourites.

The three weekly series can be summed up as follows:

Phanodorme	Phanodorme	Phanodorme
Hypalène	—	—
Vérianne	Vérianne	—
—	Véronidin	Véronidin
Rutonal	—	Rutonal
Sonéryl	Sonéryl	—
—	—	Vérianne
—	Hypalène + Sonéryl	—
Somnothyrid	Somnothyrid	—
Neurinase	—	—
Acétid	—	—
—	—	Sonéryl

We can thus logically deduce that the third series was followed by Phanodorme, Vérianne, Véronidin, etc. But Roussel had already observed that Vérianne (for which no result is noted on 27 June and 4 July) gave him on 12 July a “confused euphoria” (what did he mean by that?). On the other hand, Sonéryl, which he took each Thursday, on 29 June and 6 July, made him sleep between nine and twelve hours and gave him “extra euphoria” or “very great euphoria”. This was therefore the sedative he should adopt.

The word “sedative” is more appropriate than the word “drug”, which is generally the one used when talking of Raymond Roussel. The list drawn up by Charlotte Dufrène in fact contains only barbiturates and sleeping pills. If a dose of only three tablets was taken, then Sonéryl, which was still available until only a few years ago, did not cause intoxication or drowsiness the next morning. But, as we have seen, Roussel thought nothing of taking potentially lethal doses of fifteen to thirty tablets.

Despite this supply of drugs, Roussel was far from reaching harmony. According to Charlotte Dufrène, at the end he even desired the death he had so feared previously.

Bah, why do we fear so
Another world? We are fine here, Pluto
Receives his guests well or ill, I don't care.
Sooner or later, if we must declare
Ourselves at his gate, why encourage us
To think of tortured souls or the chorus
Of heavenly blue-eyed angels all dressed
In robes? Let's try to be straight and honest
Not fearing sad death, may our love prevail
And the beyond rest beneath its thick veil.

We can conclude from this final part of Act II of *The Scinc* that its author's

religious education had been greatly neglected. Michel Leiris (in *Roussel l'ingénu*) accurately pinpointed the Rousselian angst: "When [Raymond Roussel] imagined the ice-house in *Locus Solus* where, thanks to a scientific technique, corpses relive some vital moment of their existence, he was of course stating his refusal of death and stating it as a non-believer for whom there is nothing beyond temporal existence."

Roussel had Charlotte Dufrène write to his valet in Paris, to ask him to send down a box containing a revolver, because he supposed that as a foreigner he would not be permitted to buy one in Palermo. He added that he would certainly not have the courage to pull the trigger, and that he was counting on her to do it. She protested and refused. He then tried to win her over by producing his chequebook and asking her how much she wanted — upping the sum each time she refused. Finally, the letter remained unsent. The picture by Zo depicting, after Roussel's indications, "an elegantly dressed man, pressing the barrel of a revolver against his temple, his finger on the trigger," was to remain purely imaginary.

But, in the evening of 1 July — while General Italo Balbo's squadron of sea-planes was taking off from Orbetello to conduct the first transatlantic Italy-Chicago return flight — on getting back from his daily drive, Raymond Roussel slipped the room-servant Orlando a one-hundred-franc note, instead of his usual twenty-lira tip, and asked him to do him a favour. He handed him his razor and, without a word, gestured to make him understand that he wanted him to slit his wrists. The terrified Orlando cried out: "*No, no, Monsieur Roussel!*" and tried to return the money. Roussel pushed him away in irritation. That evening, he emptied a bottle of Neurinase.

The next morning, on 2 July, at about seven o'clock, he rang for the room-servant who discovered him covered in blood in the tub of the bathroom that communicated with room 224. He had worked up the courage to cut his left wrist himself, after clumsily slicing his thorax. "Orlando! Orlando!" Roussel shouted. "How easy and pleasant it is to die!" But afterwards, when he had recovered from his stupor, he wondered how he could have done such a thing.

Roussel had lost a lot of blood. Dr Lombardo was quickly on the scene and stitched up the wound. The other cuts healed quickly, but the slit in the wrist required proper medical treatment. "How easy it is to slit one's wrists," Roussel also told his friend. "It's nothing at all." Charlotte Dufrène subsequently kept his Gillette razor under lock and key. However, Roussel continued to use it, for his barber remembered that he cut only his hair, and always in Charlotte Dufrène's presence.

It must have been at this time that he gave Dr Lombardo copies of the third edition of *Imprcssions d'Afrique* and of the tenth edition of *Locus Solus*. And it was certainly subsequent to this failed suicide attempt (but did he really want to die? at the last minute, he had managed to ring for the room-servant) that he started locking the communicating door between his room and his friend's. He left only the door

leading to the corridor unlocked, so that he would not be disturbed by having to let in the domestics that came to serve him.

Then, until 13 July, we are in the dark. All we have is Charlotte Dufrène's log, but without any certitude that he told her the truth when, each morning, she noted down the number of pills he had taken the previous night and during the night. It was probably during the daily treatment of his cut wrist that Dr Lombardo and Charlotte Dufrène convinced Roussel to undertake a detoxification cure. Finally he agreed. He would go to the Binswanger clinic in Kreutzlingen in Switzerland. On the morning of 13 July, he had a wire sent to Switzerland. His departure was fixed for 16 July.

The evening before, 12 July, Roussel had had a very bad night. It was the first time, since Charlotte had been keeping her log, that he had reported a bad impression: a bottle and a half of *Vériane*, which had given him "confused euphoria".

That day, Roussel went out as usual. Every afternoon, the car driven by his chauffeur arrived punctually in front of the hotel at the very moment he came down from his room. He was then driven around aimlessly, for, so far as we know, he knew no one in Palermo. Too weak to walk, he never got out of the car and certainly did not visit the sights of the town — the underground galleries of the Capuchin monastery with their dried, dusty corpses, still dressed and sitting, standing or lying down — nor did he attend a Sicilian puppet show.

Who was this chauffeur? We do not know, and this is one of the obscure points concerning Roussel's final days. According to Orlando, who was then twenty-nine, it was a "young chauffeur". Michel Ney told Jean Chatard that Roussel had "hired a car and a chauffeur". However, when the latter returned to Paris, he paid a call on M. Lecreux, the marble mason, who recognised him as the chauffeur who used to wait for Roussel on Boulevard de Ménilmontant. But this chauffeur told Orlando that, while driving a taxi, he had picked up Roussel, who immediately employed him for his trip to Italy. Where does the truth lie? What is more, Michel Ney refused to admit the presence of Charlotte Dufrène in Palermo: "I assure you that he did not leave with a housekeeper. [...] So there cannot have been a housekeeper there during his trip." So, why then did he pay her a pension? As for Charlotte Dufrène, she made no mention of the chauffeur during the inquiry that followed Roussel's death. Michel Ney wanted to forget Charlotte Dufrène, and she wanted to forget the chauffeur...

Nevertheless, he was known to the hotel staff and lived at the Savoia, the hotel next door. Was somebody out to hide the truth? This chauffeur could still be alive, since he was "young" in 1933. Dr Lombardo told Mauro de Mauro that Roussel had already dismissed his chauffeur and given him the car. So it had not been hired... But, on the evening of 13 July — Orlando was adamant on this point, and he had a good memory — Roussel got out of the car completely exhausted. The chauffeur

and the servant literally had to carry him from the car to the lift, and from the lift to room 224. But Roussel still did not forget to give Orlando a silver twenty-lira coin.

"That evening," Orlando reported, "he scarcely had the strength to lift a glass." Leonardo Sciascia thought that he was exaggerating. But these were the very words used by Charlotte Dufrène, when she told Michel Leiris: "He was then so weak that he could scarcely lift up a glass, and it was practically necessary to feed him."

The day of 13 July was particularly hot and stifling in Palermo. At night, the temperature did not drop, and the air grew sultry. Leonardo Sciascia, who was only twelve at the time, remembered that he had great fun that evening. There were two reasons to celebrate. The arrival of General Balbo's squadron of twenty-five seaplanes in Cartwright, Labrador, had just been announced and the Fascist authorities had decreed a large popular celebration. It was also the day of Santa Rosalia, and the illuminations at 9.30 p.m. were to be followed at 10.00 by a great firework display to cap this religious festival. Via Mariano Stabile, which was always rather lively, became extremely noisy that night. According to Dr Lombardo, on previous days Roussel had thrown coins to the crowd from his window.

What Raymond Roussel really wanted that evening was true euphoria and sleep. Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris that he had said to her that she could sleep peacefully because he felt good and had not taken too many sleeping pills. (But the next day, she said the opposite to the police: "Yesterday evening he seemed stranger to me than ever.") She then asked him if he had taken a large dose of barbiturates. Roussel was annoyed and answered curtly "no".

"Because he was drugged, he slept on a mattress on the floor, for fear of falling out of bed," Charlotte Dufrène reported to Michel Leiris. This also seems to have been what he wrote to Dr Logre. We ought then to be astonished at the fact that, in his state of extreme weakness, Roussel managed to drag his mattress in front of the communicating door; unless it was Charlotte Dufrène who, knowing this habit, put the mattress in place then locked the door, after having put Roussel's bottles of Sonéryl within reach, since that day she noted in advance the drug he planned to take. It was perhaps she, too, who placed two pillows in the middle of the mattress, at the small of his back, rather than his head. She must then have returned to her room by the corridor, as she was to do the next day in the opposite direction. What is certain is that they discussed Sonéryl, which Roussel had decided to take that evening, and we know why: it was the product that made him sleep the longest and gave him the best euphoria, which he had been deprived of the day before.

Charlotte Dufrène left Roussel at about 10.15 p.m. If the ten-o'clock firework display had not ended yet, it soon would. At 11.00, because the street had at last become quiet again, or because she thought she had heard something, she asked Roussel if all was well. "Don't worry," he replied abruptly.

Those were his last words. Raymond Roussel died in the night of Thursday 13 to

Friday 14 July, between midnight and 2.00 a.m.

At about 10.00 in the morning of 14 July, Kreuz, the floor waiter, told Orlando that the occupant of room 224 had not got up yet. The room-servant went with the waiter as far as the door. Silence. They went to number 226. They heard water running into a basin. Charlotte Dufrène was washing and they did not disturb her. Later (it was then about eleven o'clock), Kreuz went back to room 224 and was on the point of going inside when Charlotte Dufrène emerged from her room.

Such is Orlando's version. Why hadn't Charlotte Dufrène worried earlier about Roussel's state of health? Did she think that the Sonéryl would make him sleep for an unbroken twelve hours again — or did she already know that he was dead? Michel Leiris later reported her account: "not hearing a sound [...] she knocked on the communicating door. As there was no answer, she called the floor waiter. He went in through the door from the corridor, which was unlocked." The truth is no doubt here — in part. For, when questioned by the Italian police, she made no reference to having knocked on the communicating door. The official version is slightly different:

At about 10.00 a.m., Charlotte Dufrène left her room and reached the door of the neighbouring room at the same time as Antonio Kreuz. They found Raymond Roussel lifeless, lying on his back, his face (which was calm and relaxed, Charlotte Dufrène told Michel Leiris) turned towards the communicating door. The door was locked, the key in the lock. The body was lying on a mattress on the floor. He was wearing a white nightshirt, white underpants, black socks and a "champagne"-coloured sweater — a then fashionable shade. Once the manager had been informed, he summoned Dr Lombardo, who was in the hotel. All he could do was certify the death. The manager then contacted the police.

Commissioner Giuseppe La Farina then arrived on the scene, accompanied by officer Giuseppe Zingales and a few constables. In the presence of Antonio Kreuz and Antonio Loi, who both officially identified the body, they drew up a report and decided to contact the judicial authorities. Commissioner La Farina's initial examination concluded that death had been due to an excessive absorption of narcotics. Dr Federico Rabboni's professional opinion confirmed death by intoxication. The doctor reported that this was a normally constituted man, with well-developed muscles and pannicular adiposis. The body was in a state of semi *rigor mortis*, the skin was pale, with hypostatic stains across the back and lower limbs. No external lesion was apparent, with the exception of superficial abrasions to the right thorax, which were not recent, and a scar on the lower third of the left forearm, about two centimetres long, which seemed more recent (but we know that it was not); this wound was protected by a gauze dressing and cotton covered in ointment.

The doctor also concluded that it was a natural death, probably caused by an

excessive intake of narcotics and sleeping pills, of which a large number was found in the room. It was clear that death was unrelated to the wounds that had been noted, and had not resulted from violence.

Death had occurred ten or twelve hours previously. Orlando remembered with disgust that the corpse had ejaculated. The policemen continued their report. On a small table, they found two empty tubes and twenty Sonéryl tablets; in the drawers of the wardrobe was a large quantity of assorted drugs.

After this initial report, they decided to draw up an inventory in the presence of Judge Margiotta. There was no disorder, or anything untoward in this furnished room with two twin beds. The mattress from one of them had been placed on the floor and this is where the body was lying. Below the bed was a chamber-pot containing a little urine. At the foot of the bed whose mattress had been removed, stood a small table with four bottles of Fiuggi water and the two empty tubes of Sonéryl on it. (But how can we be sure that these tubes had been full the evening before?) In the chest of drawers there were sixteen bottles of Somnothyryl, fifteen of Sonéryl, ten of Hypalène, eleven of Rutonal, eight of Phanodorme, a box of Declonol, a bottle of Hyrpholène and a tube of Somnothyryl. In a large cardboard box inside the wardrobe were ten bottles of Neurinase and twelve of Vériane. On top of the wardrobe, they found some already opened bottles of Vériane, Véronidin, Néosédan, and so on.

In the drawer of the bedside table, there was a thermometer and the sheet of paper with the dates and doses noted in Charlotte Dufrène's handwriting. Two letters were also found, one from a certain Cassiffari and the other from a certain Malet, which were analyses of levels of glucose, nitrogen and urea, presumably requested by Dr Lombardo.

A large suitcase contained family and business papers ("*varie carte d'interesse patrimoniale*"), a small suitcase contained a toilet-bag, a tarnished silver watch, two hats, clothes and linen, and finally twelve volumes entitled *Locus Solus*, "*di Armand Roussel*"; the Italian police were apparently not at all familiar with French names!

In the jacket on the hatstand were eleven fifty-lira notes. In the bathroom there was some dirty linen, and some woman's clothing in a cupboard. A trunk discovered in the corridor was brought inside the room.

There is no mention of any manuscripts. Given how keen policemen are in general on written clues, we must deduce from this that Roussel had stopped writing — unless Charlotte Dufrène, who was already looking after his money, had also been asked to keep his writings in her own room.

Naturally enough, everyone was questioned. It is the questioning of Charlotte Dufrène that concerns us the most. She began by declaring that she had lived with Raymond Roussel for twenty-three years, and that he had always been neurasthenic. He had already been hospitalised twice in rest homes — in Valmont in Switzerland

for one month, then in Saint-Cloud for eight months — but he always resumed taking drugs again. Over the last two years, his illness had worsened and, to combat it, he had taken different sorts of medication. She then added: “He was greatly interested in literature and music. In France, he is considered to be a genius. He belongs to an important Parisian family — his sister married the Duc d’Elchingen.”

On other matters, Charlotte Dufrène is not very clear and, as we have seen, she contradicted herself with Michel Leiris. She initially declared: “*Stamane dal personale di servizio appresi che il signor Roussel giaceva privo di sensi.*”^{*} Really? The police were astonished, for Kreuz had already attested that Charlotte Dufrène had emerged from her room at the exact moment when he had arrived in front of Roussel’s door. She apologised for her mistake, then corrected herself: “*Dico meglio: entrai nella stanza contemporaneamente al facchino.*”[†] And just as well. The two statements now concurred.

During this questioning, the police came up against a slight problem. Was Charlotte called Dufrène or Frédez? Everyone finally agreed to call her Frédez, her real name. And never again would Charlotte Dufrène use the surname which, according to her, Raymond Roussel had given her.

Dr Michele Lombardo was in an awkward situation. He admitted having treated Raymond Roussel, who was suffering from neurasthenia and drugging himself with barbiturates, which were keeping him in a constantly intoxicated state. He had intervened when Roussel had tried to commit suicide with a razor. For the moment, the questioning stopped there.

Judge Margiotta ordered the body to be removed, and the tubes and bottles, empty or full, to be taken away as evidence, along with the two letters and the log Charlotte Dufrène had kept. He had seals put on the two doors of the bedroom. He concluded by excluding any involvement by a third party.

Nobody mentioned the chauffeur’s name. We can nevertheless suppose that, even if he had not been told during the morning, then he would have learnt of Roussel’s death when he arrived at the hotel that afternoon for their daily drive.

That day, Charlotte Dufrène spent a lot of money. She withdrew 15,000 francs, which she had prudently lodged in her own name in the hotel safe, and left the rest there to cover the funeral. She no doubt applied to M. Victor Clément, the French consul in Palermo, for that very evening the case was closed and no charges were brought. Charlotte Dufrène claimed that it was Benito Mussolini who had personally intervened and prevented her from being bothered by the police. But that would not have been necessary. The rule was that any stories of despair were to be hushed up — such things could no longer exist in Italy under Fascist rule — and nobody in Palermo would have had much to say about the suicide of a rich foreign neurasthenic and drug addict. The local press on 15 July, *Il Giornale di Sicilia* in the morning, and the evening *L’Ora*, mentions only the marital problems of a barber, a kicking mule,

* “That morning, I learnt from the hotel staff that M. Roussel was lying unconscious.”

† “I meant to say, I went into the room at the same time as the porter.”

an attack on an insurance salesman, the discovery of some skeletons under the flagstones of Piazza Acquasanta, and Anna Fougez's success in the revue *Per voi signore*.

The following week, on 21 July, after a request from the French consul, Judge Margiotta agreed to have the seals removed and for the burial to take place. All of Raymond Roussel's belongings were given to the consul for conveying to his heirs. The body was embalmed.

Did he or did he not commit suicide? Where is the truth?

The Italian police concluded that the death had been a natural one, following an excessive intake of barbiturates. Inquiries had been made only to eliminate the possible involvement of a third party. Charlotte Dufrène, who had become her drug-addicted friend's accomplice by keeping a log of what he took, was in a delicate position. But she was not bothered by the police. In his *Journal*, Michel Leiris later noted: "Although, during our conversations in the 1930s, she always cast a little doubt over Roussel's death — accidental or voluntary — she has now told me on several occasions that 'he killed himself'."

Despite the absence of charges, Dr Michele Lombardo still had to present himself before the Procurator Royal, Stefano Mercadante, on 6 August to justify the treatment he had given to a drug addict after a suicide attempt. Should he not have demanded that he be legally interned? The Procurator accepted his explanations and agreed that the doctor had acted "*senza dolo*" ["without malice"].

"Raymond Roussel died — or committed suicide, according to some — in Palermo a few days ago," Robert Desnos wrote in *L'Intransigeant* on 7 August. As for the chauffeur, who had returned to Paris, he clearly stated that it had been suicide. In tears, he went to see M. Lecreux, the marble mason he used to visit with his master. Apparently he visited all of Roussel's family and acquaintances. Michel Ney reported: "The chauffeur [...] blackmailed me on his return..." Was there a motive for blackmail, or did Roussel's nephew simply mean that he applied urgently for his "generosity", as his uncle asked him to do in his will?

On 18 July, four days after Roussel's death, Maître Constantin, his lawyer, examined the envelopes lodged in his office, which were "to be opened at once after [his] death". He officially deposited Raymond Roussel's will. This will was registered on 31 July and the death certificate drawn up on 1 August, in the presence of M. Pierre Leiris, banker, and M. Charles Gilliard, bank clerk.

Le Figaro of 23 July reported: "We have been asked to announce the death of M. Raymond Roussel, which occurred in Palermo on 14 July. The funeral will take place in Paris, on Wednesday 26 July, at the church of Saint-Pierre-de-Chailot, where the mourners will gather. Send no flowers or wreaths. This announcement stands as an invitation."

However, religion had never played a great part in Roussel's life. He had, like

everybody else, taken his first communion, but he was not a believer, even though religious pomp appealed to him: the music, the incense, the Christmas cribs and Good Friday wayside altars which he went to see. It will also be remembered that he attended midnight mass for Christmas 1932 at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. According to Michel Ney:

"I never knew if he did or did not go to mass [...]. I know nothing about all that, he never spoke to me about it... On Sundays he often used to pretend to go to mass, but now... that does not mean that he really did go [...]."

"Of course, but... did you ever see him pray, for example?"

"Never! Never!... I don't think so, in my opinion, I don't think he was a believer... But, I don't really know, as I never had proof. [...] But then, if he had been a believer then he wouldn't have committed suicide, don't you think?"

So, the most luxurious procession money could buy headed for the church.

A mass is held for the rich suicide...*

Raymond Roussel was buried on 26 July in one of the upper cells of his vault in Père-Lachaise cemetery, "surrounded by friends", according to *Aux Écoutes* of 29 July. In front of the tomb, Michel Leiris later noted: "Black marble, with a single cross [in relief] on the cover. [Engraved] inscription in golden letters: 'Raymond Roussel (1877-1933)'. On the front [embossed letters]: 'Famille R. Roussel'. (Behind the tomb, in slanting letters engraved in the marble: '*P.A.D. 126-1931*'. †)"

Aux Écoutes added: "Raymond Roussel leaves behind an immense fortune and fine collections which have been inherited by his nephew, Michel Ney, the Duc d'Elchingen." But Michel Ney told anyone who was interested: "He was more ruined than ill... He was penniless..."

As for Charlotte Dufrène, Michel Leiris noted in his *Journal* in 1961: "When she came back to Paris after the suicide, Michel d'E. asked her if she had his uncle's pearl cufflinks. She didn't. She was so upset that she hadn't dealt with such matters. Michel d'E. invited her to the funeral, but she didn't go, preferring to pray on her own."

When he heard the news of Roussel's death, Vitrac informed one of his friends that "he has left a will which is a veritable last flourish of humour. Among other things, he wants hectares of *land for tombs* to be purchased, and that a magnificent mausoleum be built with a statue of himself that will be supernatural in size and design [...]"§ and that he was awaiting the publication of a diary or posthumous works which would provide "the key to this marvellous enigma". It was obviously his friend Michel Leiris that had given him word of possible revelations in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*.

* *New Impressions of Africa*.

† Indicating the page in the death register.

§ Letter from Roger Vitrac to Jean Puyaubert, Pinsac, 1.8.1933, quoted in Henri Béhar, *Roger Vitrac, un réprouvé du Sur-réalisme*, Nizet, 1966, and in *Mélusine*, VI.

With the exception of notes by Robert Desnos, Jean Cocteau and Michel Leiris's obituary in the *Journal de la Société des africainistes* (volume 3, fascicle 2, page 346), the articles concerning Roussel's death are of little interest. Only Pierre Lazareff surpassed his colleagues by announcing: "the edifying death in a monastery in Palermo of that wealthy and rather unusual dramatist that was Raymond Roussel" (*Paris-Midi*, 3 August 1933).

Desnos, Cocteau and Vitrac all indicated the existence of unpublished works. Roussel had, in fact, left the necessary instructions so that his only posthumous work then known, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, would be published in 1935 — first in extracts in the *Nouvelle Revue française* thanks to Michel Leiris, then in book form in the yellow dust-jacket of the Librairie Lemerre.

"He has left behind several unpublished works. For each one, he has planned the format and date of publication with his usual attention to detail," wrote Robert Desnos. Was he referring to the two books, *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres* and *Documents pour servir de canevas*, mentioned by Roussel in his will, and which would finally be published together — or was he aware of other titles?

In 1935, starting his notebook of Rousselian research, "*À rechercher*" (to search for the unpublished manuscripts Roussel himself referred to), Michel Leiris noted at the bottom of the first page: "Probably burnt by Michel d'Elchingen."

Michel Leiris was wrong to suspect Michel Ney of negligence or misconduct. We of course know that all or some of Roussel's library and possessions were dispersed at the Hôtel Drouot and ended up in the second-hand bookstores in Passage Jouffroy or at the flea market. But his personal papers and manuscripts were deposited in a furniture warehouse, presumably by Michel Ney, since he held on to two of the volumes printed on parchment which were intended for the Bibliothèque Nationale and which were presumably part of this consignment.

In 1989, over fifty years after Raymond Roussel's death, the Société Bedel, the owner of the furniture warehouses the family had used regularly, offered to give nine removal crates to the director of the Manuscripts Department of the BN. They contained various papers, photographs, manuscripts, typescripts, press cuttings, brochures and bound books.

Two parchment volumes, bound by Gruel, *Locus Solus* and *L'Étoile au Front*, have on their flyleaves Roussel's manuscript note bequeathing them to the Bibliothèque Nationale, Rue de Richelieu. It was this note that enabled the Bedel to fulfil one of Raymond Roussel's last wishes.

Sometimes, fortunate coincidences do occur! Shortly after the Bedel donation, in November 1990, the BN managed to acquire the manuscript of *Locus Solus*, bound by Gruel. Then, in March 1995, a parchment copy (uninscribed) of the same title, bound by Gruel, was also acquired. Meanwhile, in March 1994, the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet acquired the manuscript of *L'Étoile au Front*, also bound by Gruel

and bearing Paul Éluard's ex-libris, which has obviously led some people to think that Michel Ney must have given it to that Surrealist bibliophile before depositing the crates with Bedel. Then, in 1996, *La Poussière de Soleils* turned up!

But the most interesting part of the donation is the thousands of manuscript or typewritten pages. Firstly, they included some of the work we had hoped to locate: the five-act dramatisation of *Impressions d'Afrique*, and the episode with Voltaire and the fireflies. But there were also three thousand pages in exercise books containing unpublished verse, *La Seine* and *Les Noces*, not to mention two thousand pages of letters received and of personal papers. From *La Doublure* to *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, almost all the manuscripts of the various drafts have now been brought together.

There are of course certain conspicuous gaps. Where have certain letters gone, such as those from Edmond Rostand, reproduced in his books, or those from Jean Cocteau?

Some of the latter turned up in a sale in 1996, inserted in books by Cocteau that had been inscribed to Roussel. And in the October 1996 catalogue of the dealers Robert D. Valette, Pierre and Michel Dreyfus, there is mention of three (bound) books by René Crevel, Tristan Tzara and Roger Vitrac, with this explicit notice: "These volumes, long since disappeared, have recently been rediscovered in a furniture warehouse, where they were placed after Raymond Roussel committed suicide."

It would seem, in any case, that the letters from which Raymond Roussel published extracts in his books have all disappeared. He lent the originals to the printer, who must have forgotten to return them...

Three months after Raymond Roussel's death, on 22 October 1933, his brother-in-law Charles Ney, Prince de la Moskowa, and father of Michel Ney, the Duc d'Elchingen, died in Geneva. He was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery on 28 October, beside his first wife, Germaine Roussel, in Marshal Ney's vault. The family did not need to take up Roussel's kind offer to use his tomb.

Although Michel Ney had denied the very existence of Charlotte Dufrène, he paid her a small allowance until her death which, little by little, because of inflation became virtually worthless. Michel Leiris noted: "After a negative answer from the family, and after being badly received by Maître Constantin, writs were sent end of June/beginning of July [1934]. Since 1 January [1934] has lived at 6, Rue du Cloître-Saint-Merri, at Madame Normand's (her ex-domestic). Has sold everything she possessed. Not having dared expose her case herself, has demanded this action. Will ask for 18,000 francs per year (1500 francs per month)."

In 1961, in his *Journal*, Leiris also noted: "Yesterday, Monday [14 August], visited Charlotte Dufrène, now living in a small, family boarding-house, the

'Residence 200'. It was Denise Laurens [wife of the sculptor Claude Laurens] who helped her move when I learnt from John Ashbery [...] that she was living — in total poverty — in a room, shared with three other old ladies, in an *Assistance Publique* home [in Brussels]. Despite being eighty-two and having lost her teeth, her face is still beautiful with charming eyes (what people call "hazel", I believe) and a lovely smile. She becomes very animated when there is talk of Roussel. Denise L[Laurens] had repaired for her a carriage clock (marked Bédin or Bébin, Champs-Élysées) which she had kept for years despite its telling the wrong time: the carriage clock that Roussel had owned when he was a soldier [during the '14-'18 war]."

In 1961, she was receiving 750 francs per month from Michel Ney.

Looked after by Michel Leiris and his friends, she died on Saturday 29 June 1968 at the Institut Régina, 74, Avenue Bergmann, Brussels.

Then it was Michel Ney's turn to die in 1969, just after signing the contract that allowed Jean-Jacques Pauvert to publish his uncle's complete works.

... only dead fame
Has a statue and a street with its name.

This wish in *New Impressions of Africa* has not yet been fulfilled. Today, Raymond Roussel has neither one nor the other. But he has become a legend. To such an extent that Maurice Sachs wrote in *Au temps du Bocuf sur le toit*, just six years after his death:

The scandal of the year [1922] was *Locus Solus* by Raymond Roussel, at the Théâtre Antoine.

There is something crazy and brilliant about Roussel. He is a rich bourgeois eccentric. Is his mistress thirsty? "In the car," he cries, then drives her to Reims to drink a dozen orangeades before bringing her back to Paris.

One day he decided to go to Japan in a caravan. That is, in a caravan drawn by a motor-car.

All went well as far as China. There, he and his caravan were hoisted on to a ship to cross the China Sea. But, as soon as they had weighed anchor, the Japanese coastline displeased him and he immediately lost all desire to visit that country. However, as he had sworn to his best friend that he would bring him back a souvenir, he landed for one hour, purchased an iron, which he gave to his friend, then set off at once back to France.

He thinks that he writes good "Boulevard" theatre and pays a fortune for the best actors. In reality, he appeals only to a small group of poetic minds, but he doesn't know this. He will always be an unhappy man.

At the end of this supposedly eccentric life, we must say that Raymond Roussel's books are still little known.

During his lifetime, the critics were divided. The press mocked him and the Surrealists adored him for the same reason — he caused a scandal.

But few people really read him and had any genuine reason to love or detest his books. There has been little progress since.

It is useful to know about Raymond Roussel's life, no less than it is to know about Arthur Rimbaud or Antonin Artaud. But to forget that "awful sickness of the spirit" from which they suffered is to make them descend into the rut of the "rails of veal lights", the cuteness of Arthur's touched-up photograph, or the rivalry between heirs.

It is to forget that Roussel, too, suffered and that this suffering killed him.

It is to forget that it was his novels, plays and poems, which made people laugh, that led him to a gilded decline in a hotel in Palermo.

It is also to forget how much his work fascinated those whom he himself dubbed Roussel-worshippers.

It is to forget to read him.

"All I can do now is take refuge in the hope that my books may give me a little posthumous glory."



Impressions
d'Afrique



L'Étoile au Front



Locus Solus



Nouvelles
Impressions d'Afrique

L'Âme de Victor Hugo



Poussière de Soleils



Comment j'ai été
vain de mes lire



Chiquenaude



LA VUE



La Doublure



APPENDICES

I. FIRST EDITIONS OF THE WORKS OF RAYMOND ROUSSEL

The first editions of Raymond Roussel's books were published by Éditions Lemerre, 21-31, Passage Choiseul, Paris II^e, and were printed by the Imprimerie Lemerre, 6, Rue des Bergers, Paris XV^e.

No copies on Japanese vellum are known before 1909 and *Impressions d'Afrique*. These presentation copies are unnumbered; it seems that about one hundred (?) were printed.

For the parchment copies, see the second note to p.100 above.

For the main titles below, works by Roussel published in book form are given in italics only, those published in reviews in inverted commas. Only the original French titles are given.

La Doublure, novel, dated 1896, Lemerre, 1897. Publication date: 11 May 1897. Copyright: 8 July 1897. Price: 3.50 francs. There is also a "second edition". Publication date: 23 September 1900. Copyright: 13 December 1900. The back cover features a list of recent publications in the "Bibliothèque contemporaine", in which it was included, as stated in the copyright declaration.

"*Mon Âme*", *Le Gaulois*, 12 July 1897.

"*Chroniquettes*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 2 and 3 October 1897.

(These *Chroniquettes* were rediscovered and presented by Pierre Bazantay in *Le Promeneur*, XXII, October 1984.)

Chiquenaude, Lemerre, 1900. Publication date: 23 September 1900. Copyright: 13 December 1900.

"*La Vue*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 18-19 April 1903.

"*Le Concert*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 27-28 June 1903.

La Vue, Lemerre, 1904. Publication date: 31 December 1903. Copyright: 18 May 1904. Price: 3.50 francs. The back cover features an extract of the catalogue of the "Poètes contemporains" collection, in which it was included, according to the copyright declaration.

"*L'Inconsolable*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 10-11 September 1904.

"*Têtes de Carton du Carnaval de Nice*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 26-27 September 1904.

"*Nanon*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 14-15 September 1907.

"*Une Page du Folk-Lore Breton*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, 6-7 June 1908.

"*Impressions d'Afrique*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, from 10 July to 13 November 1909.

Impressions d'Afrique, Lemerre, 1910. Publication date: 2 October 1909. Copyright: 15 April 1910. Price: 3.50 francs.

At the top of page one on the inner margin has been stuck this printed "*Avis*" [Notice] on a green paper label: "*Les lecteurs qui ne sont pas initiés à l'art de Raymond Roussel auront avantage à lire ce livre d'abord de la page 212 à la page 455, ensuite de la page 1 à la page 211.*" [For the translation see p.99] There are copies on Japanese vellum and one parchment copy. A "second edition" has the same publication date as the first. The fourth edition has the publication date of 1932. (The *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, published on 30 June 1932, is advertised in this edition; copies still have the green label with the "*Avis*".)

"*Quelques heures à Bougival*", *Le Gaulois du Dimanche*, from 6 December 1913 to 28 March 1914. [This is in fact *Locus Solus*.]

Locus Solus, Lemerre, 1914. Publication date: 24 October 1913.

There are copies on Japanese vellum, some without the four-page insert with the dedication to Roussel's sister, the Duchesse d'Elchingen; two parchment copies are also known. There are also new editions (?) without publication dates, in particular a "tenth" (!) edition containing the sixteen-page booklet from 1932, "*La critique et Raymond Roussel*". [See also *La Poussière de Soleils* and *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.] In December 1922, Roussel had an advertising band added to the book: "*Un art d'infusoire, mais, je m'empresse de l'ajouter, infusoire de génie*" / Robert de Montesquiou / (*Élus et Appelés*). *C'est de ce livre que naquit Locus Solus, la pièce jouée au Théâtre Antoine.*"

Pages Choisies d'"Impressions d'Afrique" et de Locus Solus, Lemerre, 1918, no publication date. No copies on Japanese vellum or parchment are known. There are copies with white

- covers bearing the title: "Raymond Roussel / Pages Choieses" stamped with movable rubber type.
- "*L'Étoile au Front*", Acts II and III, *Comœdia*, from 12 to 22 May 1924.
- L'Étoile au Front*, Lemerre, 1925. Publication date: 5 March 1925. There is one parchment copy, as well as copies on Japanese vellum containing a four-page booklet inserted at the front of the book announcing the latest publications from the Librairie Lemerre along with a selection of reviews of Raymond Roussel's works. A "second edition" has the same dates as the first, and includes the third version of the booklet "*La critique et Raymond Roussel*", from 1932.
- La Poussière de Soleils*, Lemerre, 1927. Title-page: 1926. Publication date: 8 June 1926. Copyright: 21 March 1927. Price: 9 francs. As distinct from the other books Raymond Roussel published with Lemerre (cover-text printed in black on yellow), this title is printed in blue on cream paper, and the Lemerre trademark (a man with a spade) and the cul-de-lampe on the back cover are printed in red. In accordance with the statement on the cover and title-page, "*Ouvrage orné de dix-sept illustrations en couleurs*", there are seventeen full-colour half-tone plates. It includes the twelve-page booklet: "*La critique et l'autour de La Poussière de Soleils*". There is one parchment copy, with an inscription to the Duchesse d'Elchingen, and some copies on Japanese vellum.
- Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, Lemerre, 1932. Publication date: 30 June 1932. Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France*, no. 44, 28 October 1932: "*À paraître le 7 novembre*." Price: 15 francs; on Japanese vellum: 120 francs. There are indeed copies on Japanese vellum and one parchment copy. This volume also contains *Mon Âme* (1897) under its new title: *L'Âme de Victor Hugo*. This poem, added before printing in order to bulk up the volume, is not mentioned on the cover nor on the title-page, but is only referred to in Raymond Roussel's handwriting on a few signed copies. Printed mention of it is made on the cover and title-page of one of the two "third edition(s)", which are dated 1932, with publication date 1933; these copies include the sixteen-page booklet "*La critique et Raymond Roussel*" (also appended to the "sixth" edition of *Locus Solus*).
- "*Admirations et haines*", by Raymond Roussel, *Lc Figaro illustré*, February 1933.
- "*Chronique de Raymond Roussel*", *Le Figaro illustré*, April 1933. (This article and the preceding one were rediscovered by Jeanine Plottel and presented in the issue of the review *Europe* devoted to Raymond Roussel in October 1988.)
- "*Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*", preceded by *Documents sur Raymond Roussel*, by Michel Leiris, *Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 259, 1 April 1935. [This is the first part, from page 3 to page 41, of the next title.]
- Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes Livres*, Lemerre, 1935. Publication date: 1935. Followed by: *Citations documentaires, Textes de Grande Jeunesse ou Textes-Genèse* and *Documents pour servir de canevas*. There are some copies on Japanese vellum.
- "*Indications pour 59 dessins*", preceded by "*Autour des 'Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique'*", by Michel Leiris, *Cahiers G.L.M.*, March 1939.
- "*À La Havane*", preceded by "*Un inédit de Raymond Roussel*", by John Ashbery, *L'Arc*, no. 19, summer 1962.
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IV. PRINCIPAL ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Listed in the order given in the appendices above; place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated. *Atlas 4* = *Atlas Anthology 4*, *Raymond Roussel, Life, Death and Works*, Atlas Press, 1987 (this volume contains a more comprehensive bibliography of translations, up until 1987); *Atlas 7* = *Atlas Anthology 7*, *Raymond Roussel, Selections from Certain of His Books*, Atlas Press, 1991. *Exact Change 1* = *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, ed. Trevor Winkfield, Exact Change, Boston, 1995.

1. WORKS BY ROUSSEL

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The Star on the Forehead, trans. Martin Sorrell, *Atlas 7*.

The Dust of Suns, trans. Harry Mathews, *Atlas 7*

New Impressions of Africa. A complete verse translation by Ian Monk is forthcoming from Atlas Press in 2002. Extracts in English have appeared as follows: *Canto 3*, trans. Kenneth Koch, *Art & Literature*, 2, Lausanne, Summer 1964, most recently reprinted in *Exact Change 1*. *Cantos 1, 2 & 4*, trans. Andrew Hugill, *Xiana*², Atlas Press, 1996. *Canto 1*, trans. Marc Lowenthal, *The Club of Odd Volumes*, Amherst, 1997.

How I Wrote Certain of My Books. Title essay trans. Trevor Winkfield, Sun Press, New York, 1975 and 1977; reprinted *Exact Change 1*. *Documents to Serve as an Outline*, trans. John Ashbery, *Atlas 7*; reprinted *Exact Change 1*. *The Psychological Characteristics of Ecstasy* (by Pierre Janet), trans. John Harman, *Atlas 4*. The bibliography in *Atlas 4* also lists various translations in periodicals of Roussel's short stories from *Comment j'ai écrit...*

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- A., Paul, 259
 Abbattu, Antoine-Dominique, General, 150
 Abbattu, Jacques, 150
 Abbattu, Mme, *née* Rey de Foresta, 150, 151
 Acard, Alphonsine-Mélanie, 111
 Ader, aviator, 251
 Ader, notary, 180
 Adinolfi, 120, 135, 136
 Aicard, Jean, 24
 Ailesbury, Marchioness, 125
 Albert, G., 44
 Albert-Jean, 115
 Albuféra, Duc d', 52, 110, 295
 Albuféra, Duchesse d', 71
 Albuféra, Louis d', 52, 84, 98, 295
 Albuféra, Napoléon d', 295
 Alcott, brothers, 132, 136, 137
 Alexander II, Czar, 125
 Alexander the Great, 166
 Allais, Alphonse, 63, 90, 256
 Alphonse XIII, King, 125
 Amicis, De, 66
 André [?], 16
 André-May, 220
 Andreyor, 120, 131, 136
 Angrémy, Annie, 166, 318
 Anifa, 136
 Annunzio, Gabriele D', 38, 156, 159, 189
 Anthiome, 30
 Antoine, 294
 Antoine, André, 156, 191, 198, 206, 207, 234, 239, 261
 Apollinaire, Guillaume, 135, 199
 Aragon, Louis, 172, 190, 209, 210, 245, 264, 269, 278, 279, 329, 330
 Arcangues, Marquis d', 125
 Ariiéta, 181
 Arland, Marcel, 245
 Armen, 284
 Armory, 198
 Armstrong, see Melba
 Arnyvelde, André, 164
 Arquillière, 237, 239
 Artaud, Antonin, 352
 Arüss, Arsène, 22
 Ashbery, John, 13, 108, 110, 136, 144, 185, 187, 317, 319, 351
 Astruc, Gabriel, 53, 110
 Aubert, Louis, 31
 Aubin, widow, 127, 329
 Augier, Émile, 114
 Augustin, J.-B.-J., 143
 Auric, Georges, 209
 Austruy, Henri, 320
 Auzende, 65
 Avril, Jane, 110
 Aziyadé, 176, 177, 284
 B—iens, 167
 Baïa, 120
 Balakirew, 65
 Balaños, Mme de, 125
 Balbet, 92, 99
 Balbo, Italo, General, 341, 343
 Balleroy, Claude, 245, 329
 Bals, 143
 Balzac, Honoré de, 104, 163
 Bangoya, King, 96
 Baranger, Léon, 245
 Baratoux, Jean, Dr, 156, 291, 312
 Barbey d'Aureville, Jules, 44, 157, 188
 Barbusse, Henri, 127
 Bardet, Antoine, 126, 329
 Bariatinsky, Princess, 125
 Barrachin, Mlle, 110
 Barrès, Maurice, 52, 173, 192
 Barsymès, horse, 114
 Barthès, A., 27
 Barthou, Louis, 166, 281, 290, 313
 Bary, 26
 Bassano, Mlle de, 295
 Bastia, Jean, 151
 Bataille, Georges, 226
 Bataille, Henry, 114, 331, 332
 Baudelaire, Charles, 121, 160
 Baudoin, Henri, Maître, 140
 Baudoire, Théophile, 44
 Bazaine, Achille, Marshal, 14
 Bazantay, Pierre, 153
 Bazin, René, 24, 52
 Beaunier, André, 198
 Bedel, 349, 350
 Bédin, or Bébin, 351
 Bedu, 120
 Beer, Georges, 78
 Beethoven, 29, 45, 65
 Behanzin, 97
 Béhar, Henri, 264, 348
 Belfry, 63
 Bélias, Jean, 222, 241
 Bellaunay, Marceau, 329
 Bellent, 262
 Belli, Diane, 196, 197
 Bellonet, 148
 Bénard, Maurice, 262
 Benjamin, Edmond, 39
 Benoit, Pierre, 151, 241
 Benque, 18
 Bérenger, Henry, 37
 Bergerac, Cyrano de, 104, 132
 Bergson, Henri, 33, 280
 Bériot, de, 29
 Bernadette, 320
 Bernard, Tristan, 22
 Bernhardt, Sarah, 78, 139, 169, 198, 204, 223
 Bertin, Émile, 196, 202, 208
 Bertolino, 337, 341
 Bertrand, Louis, 281
 Berty, Jean, 44
 Bescherelle, 91
 Besnier, Patrick, 153, 266
 Bex, 120, 136
 Bidou, Henry, 45, 133, 136, 154, 227, 229, 245, 263, 329, 332
 Billard, 262
 Bills, 200
 Binswanger, Ludwig, 34, 342
 Bischoffsheim, Ferdinand, 111
 Bischoffsheim, Mme, 111
 Biton, Lucien, 210, 226, 279
 Bizet, Georges, 268
 Blache, Guillaume, 262, 280, 281
 Blaize, Jean, 24
 Blanc, Louis, 108, 109
 Blanche, Jacques-Émile, 76, 98, 172, 219, 229, 245, 309, 316, 329
 Blin de Fontenay, 145
 Blou, Roberte de, 40, 42, 107
 Bloy, Léon, 90
 B.-O., J., 231
 Boboche, dog, 62, 123
 Bodin, Thierry, 137, 240
 Bofa, Gus (Gustave Blanchot), 133
 Boiffard, Jacques-André, 247, 250
 Boissenin, 227
 Boissy, Gabriel, 92, 231, 245
 Bonaparte, Eugène Louis Jean Joseph, 53
 Bonaparte, Eugénie, Empress, 71, 73, 294, 295
 Bonaparte, Joseph, King, 71, 294
 Bonaparte, Laetitia, Princess, 270
 Bonaparte, Lucien, 71, 294
 Bonaparte, Napoléon, see Napoleon I
 Bonaparte, Roland, Prince, 226
 Bonington, Richard Parkes, 142
 Borer, Alain, 93, 282
 Bornet, 143
 Botrel, Théodore, 74, 103
 Botrot, Jean, 232, 235
 Boucher, Victor, 237
 Boucheron, 65, 113, 140
 Boudet, 150
 Boulanger, Jacques, 263
 Bour, Armand, 236
 Bourgeat, 65
 Bourget, Paul, 9, 24, 37, 41, 43, 44, 52, 67, 126, 156, 157, 247, 281, 290
 Bourrioux, 27
 Boxroom, 63
 Boyer, Denise, 196, 197
 Bravante, Eva de, 125
 Brécourt, 262
 Brentano's, 114
 Bresdin, Rodolphe, 79, 159
 Brésil, Marc, 232
 Breteuil, Alexandre Charles Marie Joseph Le Tonnelier de, 30
 Breteuil, Charles Le Tonnelier, Comte de, 30, 31, 32, 46, 52, 67, 158, 166
 Breteuil, Comtesse de, 156
 Breteuil, Henri, Marquis de, 30, 67, 158
 Breteuil, Marquise de, 156
 Breteuil, Robert de, 31, 46, 67, 98, 127, 156, 166, 167
 Breton, André, 21, 91, 105, 148, 172, 173, 190, 209, 210, 233, 244, 245, 259, 263, 264, 278, 320, 329, 330
 Breton, Simone, 210
 Bridier, Brigadier, 18
 Brinquant [?], 16
 Brisset, Jean-Pierre, 176
 Brisson, Adolphe, 152

- Brisson, Pierre, 239
 Brizeux, Auguste, 60
 Broissia, Louise Froissard,
 Vicomtesse de, 72, 139
 Brotchie, Alastair, 305
 Brown, 181
 Brown, Al, 297
 Brulley de la Brunière, Léon
 Philippe, 13
 Brunet, 196
 Brunius, J.-B., 310, 334
 Bucharessas, Bob, 78, 99
 Buffet, Eugénie, 268
 Buffet, Gabrielle, 135
 Buluxir, 262
 Bussy, Renée, 120

 Cabanne, Pierre, 135
 Caburet, Bernard, 154
 Cadet de Gassicourt, 229, 280
 Cahoud, 228
 Caillard, Adrien, 258, 262
 Caillavet, Gaston de, 78
 Caillol, 28
 Callamand, L., 228, 236, 237,
 238, 262
 Callicrates, 190
 Callot, 91
 Calvé, 228
 Calvet, Cyprien, 289
 Camastra, Duc de, 295
 Camastra, Duchesse de, *née*
 d'Elchingen, 71
 Camastra, family, 295
 Camier, Régina, 237, 238
 Campinchi, Maître, 289
 Candé, 228, 232, 235, 237, 238,
 239, 262
 Canseliet, Eugène, 172, 254, 257
 Canterel, Martial, 32, 33, 34, 35,
 36, 37, 78, 88, 106, 149, 150,
 151, 152, 153, 154, 185, 192,
 193, 194, 195, 196, 199, 201,
 202, 205, 209, 225, 249, 311,
 321
 Capazza, Zabeth, 196, 197, 202,
 204, 205
 Capet, M.-G., 143
 Caradec, François, 221, 305
 Caran d'Ache, 98
 Carco, Francis, 157
 Carmichael, 22, 96, 99, 117, 120
 Caron, Rose, 25, 65, 72, 73, 114,
 126, 260
 Carré, Albert, 25
 Carré, Jenny, 258

 Carrière, secretary, 165
 Cartassac, Mme de, 125
 Cartier, François-Charles, 194
 Cartier, François-Jules, 194
 Carvalho, Léon, 25
 Cassellari, Henriette, 64, 73, 114,
 127, 255, 329
 Cassiffari, 345
 Castellane, Comte Boni de, 26,
 145
 Castiglione, Mme de, 159
 Catulle-Mendès, Jane, 197, 212,
 239, 265
 Caumont, Jacques, 98
 Cavanagh, tailor, 113
 Cavour, Camillo Benso, Conte di,
 25
 Chabas, Paul, 44
 Chabaud, Eugène, Colonel, 68
 Chabrol, 120
 Chaffiol-Debillemont, 132
 Chagall, 309
 Chaleil, Nicole, 244
 Champagne, Julien, 172, 254
 Chandora, 136
 Chanel, Coco, 293
 Chapey, Édouard, 145
 Chaplin, Charles, 142
 Char, René, 312, 329, 330
 Charcot, Jean-Martin, 33
 Charette, 96
 Charlier, J., 143
 Charpentier, Jean-Baptiste, 141,
 142
 Charrière, 164
 Charron-Girardot, 126
 Chaslon, Thaïs, see Moreau-
 Chaslon, Thaïs
 Chatard, Jean, 18, 106, 109, 328,
 342
 Chazot, 258, 267
 Chazy, 136
 Chenal, 276
 Chenel, 28
 Chénévillot, 29, 120
 Chénier, André, 52
 Chénier, Marie-Joseph, 39
 Cherbuliez, Victor, 24, 188
 Chéron, Henri, Dr, 33, 65, 156
 Chevalier, Maurice, 90
 Chevrillon, André, 184, 290
 Chierici, Dora, 338
 Chiquenaude, 69
 Chopin, 30, 31, 32, 65
 Christophle, 23
 Chrysomallos, 83, 114, 301

 Clair, René, 138
 Claude, 45, 57, 228
 Clemenceau, Georges, 93, 126,
 282
 Clément, Edmond, 25, 93
 Clément, Georges, Dr, 25, 27,
 93, 95, 119, 286, 312
 Clément, Mme Georges, 93, 94,
 95
 Clément, Philippe, 93, 94, 95,
 115, 151, 303
 Clément, Victor, 346
 Clerc, Eugénie, 329
 Clésinger, 142
 Cocherie, 40
 Cochin, Denys, 52
 Coco, see Madrazo, Frédéric de
 Cocteau, Jean, 44, 48, 97, 115,
 121, 171, 177, 225, 245, 255,
 257, 291, 293, 294, 313, 320,
 330, 349, 350
 Cohen, Jean-Loup, 246, 313, 314,
 329
 Colette, Capitaine, 221
 Colette, Gabrielle-Sidonie, 221
 Coline, Paul, 151
 Coll, Madeleine, see Lemaire,
 Madeleine
 Colonna, Francisco, 152
 Colonne, Édouard, 226
 Confucius, 52
 Constant, Roger, 262
 Constantin, Maître, 139, 146,
 297, 328, 329, 330, 347, 350
 Coolus, Romain, 151
 Coppée, François, 9, 37, 41, 51,
 52, 79, 188
 Corneille, Pierre, 52
 Corot, Jean-Baptiste, 44, 142, 146
 Cortier, François-Jules, 193, 194
 Cortot, Alfred, 31
 Cottu, Baron, 125
 Coulet-Faure, 279
 Courneux, 262, 281
 Courteline, Georges, 156, 198,
 241, 247, 279
 Coypel, 146
 Crevel, René, 350
 Crispi, Francesco, 337
 Croesus, 213
 Croisset, Francis de, 122, 332
 Cros, Charles, 256
 Cros—, 167
 Crosnières, Simon, 103
 Cyrus, 171

 Dalcroze, Jacques, 74
 Dalí, Salvador, 313, 329, 330,
 333, 334
 Dalimier, Albert, 198
 Dallier, H., 65
 Damian, Saint, 270
 Dangles, Roger, 96
 Dante, 33, 34
 Danton, 171, 185, 193, 195, 196,
 200, 207, 227
 Darius, 285
 Daudet, Alphonse, 44, 78, 226,
 268
 Daudet, Ernest, 24, 52
 Dauphin, 262
 David, Victor, 13
 David-Weill, David, 297
 Davin, Henry, 120
 Dearly, Max, 77, 78, 236
 Debussy, Claude, 265, 266
 Deharme, Lise, 312
 Dekobra, Maurice, 241
 Delaborde, 29
 Delafosse, Léon, 65
 Delaitre, 196
 Delavigne, Casimir, 198
 Delétang, 325
 Delmet, Paul, 74
 Delpit, 179
 Deluc, 262
 Demidoff, Comte, 110
 Depierre, B., 132
 Déroulède, Paul, 108
 Desachy, Paul, 39
 Descartes, René, 164, 241, 242,
 280
 Descaves, Lucien, 156, 258
 Deshays, 120
 Desnos, Robert, 24, 91, 149, 168,
 231, 232, 233, 241, 243, 245,
 246, 247, 248, 249, 251, 260,
 264, 265, 266, 268, 276, 277,
 278, 279, 300, 302, 308, 312,
 324, 329, 330, 347, 349
 Desnos, Youki, 231, 233
 Desportes, Alexandre-François,
 141, 142
 Destailleur, Walter André, 124
 Devarennes, 120
 Devay, Louis, 289
 Dialo, 120
 Diémer, Louis, 29, 30, 31, 32,
 43, 45, 46, 65, 75, 156
 Dieulafoy, Professor, 119, 123
 Dimier, Louis, 105
 Diogenes, 213

- Dodds, Alfred, General, 97
 Dodor, 120, 136
 Donnay, Maurice, 332
 Dorgelès, Roland, 66, 332
 Dorival, 131, 132, 136, 137, 236
 Doucet, dressmaker, 17
 Doucet, Jacques, 24, 105, 139, 157, 159, 162, 214, 228, 229, 233, 247, 248, 260, 279, 312, 349
 Doumergue, Gaston, 155
 Doyen Eugène, Dr, 294
 Doyle, Conan, 188
 Dranem, 90
 Dreyfus, Pierre and Michel, 279, 350
 Drouais, François-Hubert, 142, 143, 145
 Drujon, 289
 Duard, Émile, 119, 120, 131, 136, 151
 Dubail, Yvon, General, 291
 Dubech, Lucien, 198, 200
 Dubois, Théodore, 30, 65
 Ducasse, Isidore, 44, 89, 255, 321
 Duchamp, Marcel, 135, 324
 Duchateau, Jacques, 305
 Ducloux, Maître, 24
 Dufrène, Charlotte, 46, 47, 77, 88, 91, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 126, 127, 137, 147, 148, 151, 165, 168, 169, 171, 172, 175, 176, 182, 184, 249, 251, 254, 262, 270, 271, 272, 273, 281, 283, 284, 285, 286, 292, 293, 294, 296, 323, 327, 329, 331, 335, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 350, 351
 Dujardin, Édouard, 154, 199, 213, 245
 Dulac, Jeanne, 137
 Dumas, Alexandre, 24, 161, 188, 305
 Dumas *fils*, Alexandre, 114
 Duplay, 196
 Dupuytren, 115
 Duran, Carolus, 226
 Duse, Eleonora, 223
 Dutailly, Georges, 83
 Dutilloy, 131, 136
 Duvernois, Henri, 228, 230
 Duvernoy, Alphonse, 29
 Edison, Thomas, 154
 Edward III, 13
 Edward VII, 30, 98, 125
 Egroisard, Lucien, 25
 Egroisard, Gillette, 75, 101
 Einstein, Albert, 225, 251
 Elchingen, d', see Ney
 Elianne, 196, 197
 Élise, 228
 Éluard, Paul, 209, 245, 246, 249, 312, 329, 330, 350
 Éluard-Valette, Cécile, 279, 312
 Émile-Bayard, Jean, 212
 Ennery, d', 103
 Ephrussi, May, 67
 Epicurus, 292
 Erba, see Fabre, Saturnin
 Ergaste, 104, 136
 Ernesta [?]
 Ernst, Max, 221, 269
 Espagnol, Raymond, 289
 Espitalier, Jean-Michel, 310
 Essling, Prince d', see Masséna, Victor
 Essling, Princesse d', see Heine, Marguerite
 Eudeline, 143
 Evrard, 120
 Fabre, Saturnin, 121, 196, 197, 205, 206, 208
 Fabry, 120, 196, 197,
 Faïmana, 181
 Falkenberg, Georges, 65
 Fantasio, 133
 Fargue, Léon-Paul, 219
 Farman, 153
 Farrère, Claude, 192
 Faublas, Jacqueline de, 319
 Faucigny-Lucinge, Prince de, 67
 Fauré, Gabriel, 65
 Faure-Lucas, Jane, 227, 245
 Faustine, 83, 194, 196, 197
 Faye, Hervé, 226
 Federal, 155, 298
 Félicie, 75
 Felt, Mme de, 44
 Fenaille, 298
 Fénéon, Félix, 221
 Fénéux, 28
 Féodoroff, Georges, 25, 73, 255, 269, 285, 329
 Féraudy, de, 78
 Ferdière, Gaston, 248
 Ferna, 96
 Fernet, Jacques Ernest, 13
 Fernet, Marie Anne Eugénie, 13
 Ferry, Jean, 75, 89, 97, 115, 138, 166, 167, 172, 209, 211, 233, 257, 280, 286, 310, 317, 334
 Feuillet, Octave, 24
 Fézensac, Duc de, 295
 Fézensac, Duchesse de, 71
 Feydeau, Georges, 114
 Fichet, 252
 Fighiera, Charles-Alexandre, 73
 Fischer, Max and Alex, 198, 199
 Fissot, 29
 Flambeau, 69
 Flameng, François, 73
 Flammarion, Camille, 43, 76, 152, 176, 177, 188, 225, 226, 227, 257, 290
 Flammarion, Mme, 226, 227
 Flateau, Georges, 196, 204, 205, 206, 208
 Flaubert, Gustave, 104
 Flers, Robert de, 78
 Fleury, Maurice de, Dr, 293
 Flio, 96, 166
 Florand, A., Dr, 170
 Florange, Jacques, 234, 235
 Flory, Régine, 245
 Flournoy, Théodore, 35
 Flurian, 262, 280
 Fogar, 102, 172, 229
 Formont, Maxime, 44, 217
 Fort, Paul, 334, 337
 Foucault, Jean Bernard Léon, 251
 Foucault, Michel, 302, 323
 Foucqueteau, Pascaline, 194
 Foucqueteau, Thierry, 194
 Fougez, Anna, 347
 Fould, Achille, 110, 126
 Fould, Charlotte Amélie Anne, 30, 52
 Fould, Hélène, 126
 Fould, Max, 126
 Fouquières, André de, 108
 Fourret, Maurice, 196, 204, 207, 208, 212
 Fournay, 120
 Fragonard, Jean-Honoré, 142, 146
 Fragon, 90
 Fraigneau, André, 293
 France, Anatole, 44, 163, 173, 192, 226, 281
 Francia, Mlle, 197
 Francis, Saint, 270
 Franc-Nohain, 197
 François I, 15
 Franquet, Mme, 120
 Fred, 127
 Frederick the Great, 223
 Frédez, Charles, 111
 Frédez, Marie Charlotte, see Dufrène, Charlotte
 Frénu, 262, 280
 Fresle, 102
 Fresnel, Mme, 228
 Freud, Sigmund, 33
 Frondaie, Mme, 162, 191, 192, 204, 272
 Frondaie, Pierre, 74, 77, 91, 137, 153, 162, 173, 174, 185, 186, 187, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 198, 199, 201, 202, 204, 205, 207, 209, 210, 211, 225, 227, 272, 290
 Frost, 63
 Fügen, Henri-Frédéric, 142
 Fugère, Lucien, 65
 Fugère, Paul, 77
 Fulcanelli, see Canseliet, Eugène
 Furtado-Heine, Paule, 73
 Fuzelier, 262
 Gaboriau, Émile, 188
 Gabriac, Alexandre, 72, 76
 Gagey, Dr, 229
 Gailhard, M.P., 133, 226
 Gaillard, Marius-François, 258, 259, 265, 266
 Gainsborough, Thomas, 142, 146
 Galantaris, C., 137, 226, 240
 Galipaux, Félix, 78, 194, 196, 199, 200, 202, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 213
 Gallé, Émile, 158
 Galliffet, Gaston-Alexandre-Auguste, General Marquis de, 70
 Galvin, 120
 Ganderax, Étienne, 254
 Ganderax, Louis, 25, 72, 103, 150, 151, 156
 Ganderax, Nina, 25, 114
 Gariot, 262
 Garnier, Pierre, 196
 Gastbled, couple, 127, 329
 Gastinne-Renette, 92, 258
 Gaston, 228
 Gauffre, 69
 Gauthier-Villars, Henri, see Willy
 Gauthier-Villars, Jean-Albert, 221
 Gay, Edmond, 289
 Gazier, 289
 Gémier, Firmin, 131, 133, 136, 195, 196

- Geneviève, 228
 Geoffroy, M., 262
 Georges-Michel, Michel, 296, 304
 Gérard, 193
 Gérard, Rosemonde, see Rostand, Mme
 Germain, José, 245
 Gertrude, 30
 Gheest, MM. de, 295
 Gide, André, 102, 114, 171, 172, 219, 229, 245, 294, 329
 Gignoux, Régis, 89, 137, 198, 206, 244
 Gil, 152
 Gilliard, Charles, 347
 Ginisty, Paul, 198
 Girardin, Alexandre de, 25
 Givaudan, Claude, 96
 Givrey, R. de, 239
 Gobin, A., gunsmith, 92
 Goethe, 158
 Goldstein, Suzanne, 207
 Goncourt, Edmond de, 78, 90, 163
 Goncourt, Jules de, 90
 Goodman, Lanie, 266
 Gorieux, 262
 Goron, Marie-François, 243, 307, 308, 309, 311
 Goujon, Jean-Paul, 218
 Gounod, 74, 268
 Gournery, Jean, 297
 Gramont, Duchesse de, 16
 Grancey, J., 337
 Grandville, 160
 Granier, 120
 Granier, Jeanne, 126
 Greffulhe, Comtesse, 139
 Gregh, Fernand, 227, 235, 240, 241, 245, 268, 329
 Grégorio, Paul, 231
 Greuze, Jean-Baptiste, 142
 Gréville, Henry, 24
 Griaule, Marcel, 296, 297
 Grimprel, Alix, 14
 Grimprel, Colette, 148
 Grimprel, family, 14, 125, 156
 Grimprel, Maxime, 148
 Grimprel, Nicole, 74, 148, 221, 234, 282, 292, 313, 323
 Grimprel, Philippe, 234
 Grimprel, Suzanne, 246, 281, 282, 313
 Grimprel, Victor Augustin, 14, 32, 71, 292, 295
 Grosclaude, Étienne, 156
 Gruel, Léon and Paul, 17, 100, 114, 150, 151, 179, 319, 334, 349
 Grumbach, Mme, 228, 232, 235, 236, 237
 Guadalmina, Mme de, 73
 Guédu, Mme, 140
 Guilbert, Yvette, 90
 Guillain, Dr, 293
 Guillot, André, 26, 85, 272, 273, 275
 Guillot de Saix, 103, 198
 Guinon, Mme, 28
 Guirand, 30
 Guirec, 120
 Guitry, Lucien, 77, 230
 Guitry, Sacha, 114
 Gunsbourg, Niki de, 125
 Guyon, Cécile, 228
 Guyot, Jenny, 314
 Guyot-Bussière, Madeleine, 14, 18, 314
 Gyp, 24
 Haas, 140
 Hack, Alfred d', 337
 Haffner, teacher, 147
 Hahn, Reynaldo, 21, 47, 72, 74, 75, 76, 95, 110, 219
 Hakidjé, 284
 Halawsa, 179
 Hall, 143
 Handel, 22, 75
 Hanotaux, Gabriel, 332
 Harmand, Paulette, 196, 197
 Hasselmans, 29
 Haussmann, Baron, 14
 Hauteclouque, Xavier de, 124
 Hebert, 72
 Hébert, 233
 Heiling, Sterling, 104, 139, 250
 Heine, Marguerite, Princesse d'Essling, 71, 72, 73
 Heine, Maurice, 229
 Heine, Michel, 71
 Hellstern, cobbler, 97, 98, 113
 Hémerly, Ch., 262
 Hennique, Léon, 78
 Henri IV, 53
 Henri, cook, 272, 275, 329
 Henry, 27
 Heredia, José-Maria de, 44
 Hermant, Abel, 44, 78, 245, 282, 332
 Hérold, Jacques, 144, 176, 226, 317
 Herriot, Édouard, 290
 Herté, 120
 Hervieu, Paul, 191, 192
 Hiaz, 262
 Hober, Maître, 194
 Holmès, Augusta, 73, 74
 Homer, 190
 Houdini, Robert, 190
 Houry, André, 168
 Houville, Gérard d', 332
 Huet, Jean-Baptiste, 142
 Hugo, Sigisbert, 313
 Hugo, Victor, 9, 30, 31, 34, 35, 51, 77, 78, 188, 191, 310, 311, 313
 Huguenet, 237, 239
 Humphrey, O., 143
 Hutteau d'Origny, Vicomte, 70
 Huysmans, J.-K., 163
 Ibn Battuta, 13
 Ignacette, 262, 280
 Ijoui, S. d', 196, 197
 Imbert, Paul, 279
 Isahay, J.-B., 143
 Ivoi, Paul d', 227
 Jacob, Max, 219
 Jacquard, 65
 Jacquelin, M., 262
 Jacquemin, Michel, 24
 Jacques, 262, 281
 Jacquet, Dr, 163
 Jacquin, Abel, 262
 Jais, dog, 61
 Jaloux, Edmond, 229, 245, 329
 Jamet, Jean, 88
 Janet, Pierre, Dr, 21, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 42, 45, 46, 47, 57, 63, 88, 89, 99, 106, 107, 115, 149, 170, 184, 185, 225, 247, 272, 273, 280, 293, 311, 321, 335
 Janin, Jules, 14
 Jannet, Juliette, 62, 63, 67, 75, 76, 105, 113, 144, 165, 168, 184, 246, 281, 282, 327
 Janssen, Jules, 226
 Janvier de La Motte, 52
 Jarry, Alfred, 89, 121, 176, 199, 243, 321, 330
 Jasmine, 196, 202, 205
 Jean, Marcel, 168
 Jeanne, 15, 21, 22, 25, 58, 116
 Jeannot, Georges, 78, 79
 Jenn, 120
 Jizme, 96, 105, 120, 131, 134, 137
 Joffre, 228, 232, 235, 237, 238, 239, 262
 Joffre, Joseph, Marshal, 252
 John, 181
 Johns, C.F., & Pegg, 113
 Joltrain, Dr, 293
 Jonghe, Baudoin de, 126
 Jonghe, Thilda de, 126
 Jonghe, Vicomtesse de, 22, 126, 166
 Jonghe, Yseult de, 126
 Jordan, Catherine, 262
 Josephson, M., 209
 Joussac, Gaston, 144, 228, 232, 247
 Joussac, Mme, 228
 Juana, Mlle, 337
 Juillard, 29, 99, 119, 120, 136, 175
 Juliet, 304
 Jung, 143
 Kahn, Gustave, 41
 Kauffmann, A., 143
 Keene, Denise, 228
 Kendall, 127
 Kerbellec, Philippe G., 25, 27, 72, 152, 172
 Khóng-dek-lèn, cat, 155, 194, 197
 King of Hearts, 194, 197
 Kindal, 113
 Kléossem, 262
 Klingstet, C.-G., 143
 Klotz, Henri, 198
 Kolb, Philip, 84
 Kolb, Thérèse, 78
 Konta, 143
 Koval, 238
 Kra, Simon, 219, 245
 Kreutz, Antonio, 338, 344, 346
 Kriegck, 110
 L., G., 204
 Labarre, L., 337
 Labiche, Eugène, 17
 Laby, Géo, 196
 La Caze, Hélène, 295, 296, 313, 335
 La Caze, Jacques, 296
 Lacos, Michel, 89, 137
 Lacoste, 252, 272
 Lafarge, Camille, 244
 La Farina, Giuseppe, Commissioner, 344, 345, 346,

- 347
 Lafitte, Pierre, 127
 Lafleur, 102
 La Fontaine, 187, 188
 Laforgue, Dr, 324
 Laforgue, 157
 Lagier, Suzanne, 90
 Lair-Dubreuil, F., Maître, 140
 La Jeunesse, Ernest, 131
 Lalou, René, 245, 255, 327, 329
 Laloy, Louis, 245, 263, 266, 329
 Lambert, Albert, 78
 Lambert, Eugène, 142
 Lami, Eugène, 26, 139, 142
 Lamouroux, 123
 Lancret, 313
 Landau, Léon, 104
 Langlade, Baronne de, 126, 166
 Langlade, Louis de, 22, 126
 Laparra, Raoul, 31
 Lapauze, Henri, 104
 Lapierre, Marc, 108, 109
 La Rochefoucauld, Jean, Comte de, 22, 67, 125
 Larousse, 91
 Lasquin *fils*, B., 140
 Laurens, Claude, 351
 Laurens, Denise, 351
 Laussédât, Colonel, 226
 Lautreâmont, see Ducasse, Isidore
 La Vallière, Ève, 79
 Lawrence, Sir Thomas, 142, 146
 Layrle [?], Admiral, 16
 Lazareff, Pierre, 133, 191, 349
 Lebal, Gaston, 198
 Leblanc, Maurice, 24
 Le Bourgeois, 84
 Le Brun, Annie, 90, 98, 264, 302
 Le Cardonnel, Georges, 240
 Lecler, Henri, 102
 Lecocq, Charles, 285
 Lecocq-Vallon, Nicole, see Grimprel, Nicole
 Leconte de Lisle, 44
 Lecreux, Léon, 299, 300, 334, 342, 347
 Le Gallo, 261
 Léger, 143
 Legouvê, Ernest, 226
 Lehman, Lili, 76
 Lehman, Maurice, 257
 Leidjé, 22, 43, 75, 227, 228, 231
 Leiris, Eugène, 32, 46, 62, 63, 74, 75, 76, 82, 135, 156, 165, 166, 167, 169, 170, 171, 187, 188, 210, 269, 270, 296, 297, 302, 304
 Leiris, Jacques, 75, 168, 169, 208
 Leiris, Juliette, see Jannet, Juliette
 Leiris, Mme, 62, 75, 76, 135, 165, 169, 184, 220, 251, 286
 Leiris, Michel, 7, 17, 23, 24, 26, 29, 32, 34, 38, 45, 46, 47, 62, 63, 74, 75, 77, 82, 84, 85, 88, 91, 100, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 124, 126, 135, 148, 149, 165, 168, 169, 173, 175, 180, 184, 191, 208, 210, 220, 221, 232, 243, 246, 250, 251, 254, 257, 259, 264, 268, 269, 271, 272, 275, 276, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 293, 296, 297, 300, 302, 303, 305, 307, 308, 310, 311, 319, 320, 322, 323, 324, 327, 329, 330, 331, 334, 335, 337, 338, 341, 343, 344, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351
 Leiris, Pierre, 75, 90, 111, 127, 148, 165, 168, 169, 184, 188, 208, 217, 228, 243, 244, 254, 269, 270, 282, 285, 323, 329, 347
 Lelgoualch, 97, 131
 Le Lionnais, François, 159, 326
 Lelou, Bernard, 121, 304
 Lemaire, Hector, 21, 72
 Lemaire, Madeleine, 21, 26, 47, 52, 72, 76, 81, 221, 316
 Lemaitre, Jules, 40
 Lemerre, Alphonse, and Lemerre, publishing house, 31, 37, 43, 44, 45, 52, 68, 82, 87, 96, 99, 100, 101, 116, 150, 151, 155, 168, 171, 172, 211, 217, 219, 222, 223, 229, 241, 245, 269, 286, 300, 301, 307, 308, 311, 314, 317, 322, 323, 329, 330, 335, 349
 Lemerre, Alphonse, grandson of the latter, 44
 Lemerre, Désiré, 44, 150, 301
 Lemerre, Pierre, 44
 Lenoir, Gaspard, 40, 41, 42, 69, 251
 Lenôtre, Georges, 332
 Léonce, 262
 Léopold, King of Belgium, 125
 Lépicié, Nicolas-Bernard, 142
 Le Prieur, 120, 136
 Leriche, Augustine, 78
 Lesieur, 262
 Lespilaire, Jeanne, 289
 Lesseps, Bertrand de, 172
 Lesseps, Ferdinand de, 172, 295
 Lesseps, Mathieu, Comte de, 296
 Lesseps, Paul de, 172
 Le Tonnelier, see Breteuil
 Leuchars and Son, 114
 Leverd, Georges, 179
 Le Villaire, Maître, 14
 Lévy, Booz, 53
 Lissandreau, 228
 Liszt, 32
 Littré, 91
 Loewenstein, Alfred, 123
 Logre, B.-J., Dr, 293, 324, 343
 Loi, Antonio, 344
 Lombard, Jacques, 44
 Lombard, Paul, 231, 232
 Lombardo, Michele, Dr, 155, 293, 337, 338, 339, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347
 London, Géo, 289
 Lorrain, Jean, 44, 46, 163
 Loti, Mme, 180, 183
 Loti, Pierre, 9, 20, 36, 37, 39, 76, 85, 97, 125, 156, 174, 176, 177, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 188, 214, 219, 221, 227, 271, 284, 293, 308, 333
 Loti-Viaud, Elsie, 183, 271
 Loti-Viaud, Samuel, 180, 183, 271
 Loubet, Émile, 68
 Louis XIV, 149
 Louli, see Langlade, Louis de
 Louÿs, Pierre, 192
 Loÿs-Chandieu, Marquise de, *née* de Pourtalès, 70
 Luce, 57
 Lugné-Poe, Aurélien, 50, 137, 191, 240, 245, 280
 Lyautey, Louis Hubert, 281
 Lyon, R., 120
 Lysana, 196, 197, 204, 205
 M—, 144
 Maar, Dora, 226
 MacLelan, Miss, 126, 127, 273
 MacLelan, Walter, 127
 Madeleine, 33, 35
 Madelin, Louis, 281
 Madrazo, Frédéric de, 21, 151
 Mafia, Huron, 22
 Magnan, 72, 73, 114
 Maizeroy, René, 78
 Mâle, Émile, 281
 Malet, 345
 Mallarmé, Stéphane, 176, 264, 321
 Mans, F.-H., 142
 Maple, 252
 Marantaroa, Queen, 180, 183, 184
 Marcenac, 262
 Marchand, 196
 Marchès, Léo, 207, 211, 231
 Mardrus, Joseph Charles, 24, 104
 Margarita, 18, 115, 132
 Margiotta, Judge, 345, 346, 347
 Margueritte, Paul and Victor, 39
 Mariaud, 27, 28
 Marketti, 40
 Marmontel, Antonin, 65
 Marquet, 120, 136
 Mars, 197
 Marshal, A., 262
 Martial and Armand, 228
 Martin, M., 280
 Martini, Georges, 71
 Mas, Émile, 232
 Masclat, Hector, 188
 Masséna, André, 71, 73, 74
 Masséna, family, 295
 Masséna, Marshal, 73, 102
 Masséna, Victor, Duc de Rivoli, Prince d'Essling, 71, 73, 152, 295
 Massenet, 74, 103, 105, 114, 191, 226
 Masson, André, 220, 221, 226
 Massy, 281
 Matarasso, Jacques, 25, 279, 328
 Mata Reva, see Loti, Pierre
 Mathews, Harry, 144, 279, 305
 Mathilde, Princess, 146
 Mattin, Dr, 84, 86, 118, 137, 156
 Mauburger, Gaston, 36, 181, 182, 183
 Maugis, see Willy
 Maupassant, Guy de, 78
 Mauriac, François, 213
 Mauro de Mauro, 337, 342
 Max, de, 77, 236
 May, Pierre-André, 220
 Mayol, 90
 Mazars, Pierre, 226
 Mazichl, 196, 226
 Mazoyet, Eugène de, 289
 Mazoyet, Louise de, *née* Schloup, 289
 Mazoyet, Marie de, *née* Hoyaux, 289

- Meilhac, Henri, 25
 Meissonier, 139
 Melba, 175
 Mellerio, MM., known as Meller, 140
 Méphisto, 69
 Mercadante, Stefano, 347
 Méré, Charles, 92
 Méténier, Oscar, 24
 Meyer, Arthur, 44, 50, 52, 53, 58, 72, 96, 156
 Michelet, 332
 Michelez, 136
 Mignard, 142
 Millet, R., 140, 209
 Mina, Yvette, 120
 Miramon, Marquis de, 296
 Mirbeau, Octave, 78
 Miremont, 125
 Miró, Joan, 220, 221
 Mistinguett, 90
 Molère, 52, 156
 Monet, Claude, 140
 Monk, Ian, 20, 305
 Monnier, Adrienne, 172
 Montalescot, Louise, 120, 136
 Montefiore, Guy, 154
 Montel, Blanche, 238
 Montesquiou, Philippe de, 295
 Montesquiou, Robert de, 25, 48, 62, 76, 77, 79, 80, 83, 89, 90, 92, 97, 99, 104, 105, 119, 121, 151, 153, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 183, 188, 189, 190, 191, 211, 214, 218, 222, 223, 229, 242, 245
 Montesquiou-Fézensac, family, 295
 Mopsus, cockerel, 83, 98, 166, 171, 193, 242
 Morand, Paul, 316
 Moré, Marcel, 66
 Moreau, L., 143
 Moreau-Chaslon, Alix, 14
 Moreau-Chaslon, Aristide, 13, 14, 15, 24, 83, 300
 Moreau-Chaslon, Georges, 14
 Moreau-Chaslon, Marguerite, see Roussel, Marguerite
 Moreau-Chaslon, Thais, 13, 14, 24, 83, 300
 Moréno, Marguerite, 93
 Morise, Max, 209
 Morisse, Charles, 239
 Morny, Charles, Duc de, 15
 Mortier, Pierre, 161
 Morton, Léon, 77, 196, 200, 205, 206, 208
 Moses, 36
 Mossa, Alexis, 39
 Mossa, Gustave-Adolphe, 39
 Motte, Warren, 305
 Mouézy-Eon, 263
 Moulay-Youssef, Sultan, 270
 Muloche, farm, 127
 Müller, Charles, 156, 244
 Mun, Albert de, 52
 Murat, Caroline, 98, 125
 Murat, Eugène, Princesse, *née* d'Elchingen, 70, 71, 126
 Murat, family, 52, 295
 Murat, Jérôme, 295
 Murat, Joachim, Prince, 29, 71, 110, 126, 272, 295, 296
 Murat, Paul, 98, 125, 295
 Murat, Pierre, 98, 125, 295
 Musset, Alfred de, 50
 Mussolini, Benito, 270, 271, 346
 Mynka, 197
 Myriah, 120
 Naïr, 96, 120, 166
 Napoleon I, 21, 34, 35, 198
 Napoleon II, 188
 Napoleon III, 13, 15, 25, 295
 Napoleon, Princesse, 295
 Natalie, Queen of Serbia, 125
 Nattier, Jean-Marc, 142, 146
 Nemours, Duc de, 110
 Néret, Fanny, 42
 Nerval, Gérard de, 256
 Nesle, Mlle de, 147
 Nevill, 72
 Ney, Charles, 9, 52, 67, 70, 71, 72, 73, 102, 110, 114, 124, 139, 147, 272, 294, 295, 300, 324, 328, 346, 350
 Ney, family, 295
 Ney, Michel, 18, 22, 61, 63, 65, 67, 68, 75, 77, 84, 98, 106, 109, 114, 123, 125, 135, 147, 148, 168, 169, 170, 175, 184, 234, 251, 270, 292, 294, 295, 296, 300, 313, 319, 323, 324, 328, 329, 330, 335, 342, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351
 Ney, Michel, Charles's father, 70, 73
 Ney, Michel, Marshal, 147, 295, 300, 334, 350
 Ney, Michel, second Prince de la Moskowa, 110
 Ney, Napoléon, Prince de la Moskowa, 71, 72, 272, 294
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 281
 Nivette, Suzanne, 262
 Nivoix, Paul, 235, 236, 238
 Noailles, Charles de, 297
 Noc, Yvan, 259
 Noël, 171
 Noël, Édouard, 24, 196
 Noël, Octave, 24
 Nohain, Jean, 197
 Nointel, 193, 194, 196
 Norbert, 120
 Normand, Mme, 350
 Noussel, Raymond, 194
 Nozière, 135, 136, 197, 239, 265
 Numa, 258, 267
 Numès, 262
 Numès *sils*, 196, 262
 Oberthur, 166
 O'Connor, Arthur, 31
 Ohnet, Georges, 24, 164
 O'Klam, Mlle, 196, 197
 Oko, 284
 Olga, 120
 Ollivier, Émile, 52
 Orlando, Gaetano, 337, 338, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345
 Orléans, Duc d', 110
 O'Rossen, 228
 Oscarine, 262
 Ottaviano, Count, 25
 Otto et Pirou, 18, 112, 299, 335
 Ouvrard, 90
 Pally, 262
 Papurello, Dayses, 120
 Paquin, André, 91
 Paracelsus, 171, 255
 Parisier-Plottel, Jeanine, 331, 332
 Pascal, André, 115
 Pascal, Blaise, 52
 Pastou [or Paston], 120
 Paul, lover, 42, 107
 Paul, valet, 165, 329
 Pauley, 238
 Paulme, 140
 Pauvert, Jean-Jacques, 84, 351
 Pawlowski, Gaston de, 198, 266, 267, 278
 Peck and Martin, 228
 Pegg, 113
 Pellenc, Jean, 246, 282, 329
 Penalver, Mme de, 125
 Péret, Benjamin, 209, 243, 244
 Peretti de La Rocca, Comtesse de, 246
 Péron, L.-L., 143
 Pérot, 319
 Perrin, Louis, 44
 Péruse, garage, 254
 Pétain, Philippe, 281
 Petit, Georges, 139, 140
 Peyronnet, Albert de, 202
 Philip of Macedonia, 166
 Philippe, valet, 273
 Philippo, 90, 131, 133
 Pia, Pascal, 102, 280
 Picabia, Francis, 135, 138, 209, 241
 Picpus, brethren, 181
 Pierné, Gabriel, 65
 Pierson, Ketty, 262
 Piffard, widow, *née* Martin, 289
 Pille, Henri, 44
 Pinaud et Amour, 113
 Pinel, Casimir, Dr, 15
 Pinel, Philippe, 15
 Pioch, Georges, 245, 267, 277, 278
 Pípo, dog, 61, 62
 Pius XI, Pope, 270, 271
 Plessys, Maurice du, 201
 Plunkett, 177, 181
 Poe, Edgar Allan, 103, 154, 263, 265
 Poincaré, 290
 Poindron, 107
 Poiret, Paul, 196, 200, 202, 207, 208, 212, 213
 Poisignon, 28
 Polaire, 90, 192
 Polin, 16
 Pollonais, Gaston, 104
 Pomaré IV, Aimata, Queen, 177, 179, 183
 Pomaré V, 180
 Pomaré, Tekan, Princess, 180, 303
 Ponchon, Raoul, 157
 Pontet, J.A., 120
 Potin, Félix, 226
 Pozzi, Dr, 223
 Praviel, Armand, 152
 Prax, Maurice, 183, 198, 201
 Précope, cook, 127, 272
 Prévost, Marcel, 31, 122, 156, 245, 281, 316, 326, 327
 Prévost, Victor, 256
 Priolet, 120
 Privas, Xavier, 74

- Proust, Adrien, 106
 Proust, Mme, 84
 Proust, Marcel, 21, 23, 30, 46, 47, 48, 83, 84, 90, 106, 163, 218, 219, 221, 245, 255, 293
 Proust's grandfather, see Weill, Nathé
 Prudhomme, Jean, 262, 266
 Pudding, 63
 Puyaubert, Jean, 348
 Puylagarde, 228, 232, 247
- Queen of Hearts, 194, 197
 Quella-Villéger, Alain, 177, 181
 Queneau, Raymond, 21, 30, 66, 121, 303, 312, 316, 317, 324
 Quentin-Bauchart, Maurice, 16
 Quidet, François, 13
 Quinche, Eugène, 44
 Quinquand, Anna, 105
 Quint, Léon-Pierre, 218
- Rabboni, Federico, Dr, 344
 Rabelais, François, 52, 104, 176
 Rachilde, 165
 Racine, Jean, 52, 96, 316
 Rahir, Édouard, 52
 Raimu, 237
 Raisy, Carmen de, 120, 131, 135
 Ramare, Maître, 194
 Raoul, 15, 21, 22, 25, 58
 Raphael, 242
 Rarahu, 177, 179, 181, 182, 183
 Rarahu, Laurent, 177
 Rarahu, Louis, 177
 Rarahu, Taa, 177
 Rarahu, Tauaea, 177
 Rasputin, 125
 Rauzéna, Jean, 262
 Réard, 262
 Rebatet, 272
 Reboux, Paul, 103, 156, 229, 243, 244, 245, 263, 268, 291, 329, 332
 Redfern, dressmaker, 17
 Redstone, Willy, 120
 Régis, Georges, 252
 Régnier, Henri de, 156, 312, 332
 Reille, Baronne, 72
 Reille, Baronne Xavier, *née* de Cholet, 72, 102
 Reille, Marshal, 102
 Reille, René, Baron, 102
 Reille, Xavier, Baron, 72, 102, 103
 Reinig, René Eugène Alexandre, 298, 299
- Rémond, 120
 Renoir, Auguste, 140, 238
 Renouat, Philippe, valet, 126
 Réty, Émile, 29
 Reuillard, Gabriel, 267
 Rey de Foresta, see Abbattucci, Mme
 Rey, Étienne, 259, 263, 265, 266
 Ribot, Théodule, 33
 Richard, Élie, 89, 184, 246, 254, 283, 291, 317, 329
 Richard, Frantz, 104
 Richemond, Lucien, 119
 Richepin, Jean, 156, 157, 166, 188, 245, 316, 327
 Richepin, Tiarko, 166
 Rieux, Jean, 151
 Rim, Carlo, 201
 Rimbaud, Arthur, 334, 352
 Rip (Georges Thenon), 316
 Risler, 65
 Risse, Germaine, 261, 262
 Rivière, Georges-Henri, 297
 Rivoire, André, 121, 137, 192, 209, 229, 230, 239, 245
 Robert, Hubert, 124, 142, 146
 Rollet, Mlle, 28
 Roman, José, 30
 Romeo, 304
 Romih, Max, 324, 326
 Romulus, horse, 75
 Rondel, A., 204, 279
 Rose, 49
 Rostand, Edmond, 9, 58, 69, 101, 102, 105, 116, 117, 123, 125, 156, 173, 185, 223, 245, 290, 301, 350
 Rostand, Mme, 102, 125, 166, 260
 Rostand, Maurice, 102, 112, 125, 166, 260, 279
 Rothschild, see also Pascal, André, 126, 191
 Rousseau, Henri, le Douanier, 221
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 13, 150, 151
 Rousseau, Philippe, 142
 Roussel, Blanche, 218
 Roussel, Charles, 66
 Roussel, Eugène, Raymond's father, 13, 14, 29, 31, 32, 37, 43, 46, 52, 66, 71, 74, 77, 83, 200, 300
 Roussel, Georges, painter, 50
 Roussel, Georges, Raymond's brother, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 28, 29, 32, 47, 50, 67, 70, 71, 72, 83, 102, 126, 300
 Roussel, Georges, sub-editor of *La Plume*, 50
 Roussel, Germaine, Raymond's sister, Comtesse de Breteuil, then Duchesse d'Elchingen, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 30, 31, 32, 52, 62, 65, 67, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 84, 98, 110, 114, 123, 124, 125, 126, 135, 139, 145, 146, 147, 151, 156, 158, 159, 162, 166, 168, 169, 191, 200, 207, 234, 246, 249, 271, 274, 275, 292, 294, 295, 296, 300, 319, 332, 334, 346, 350
 Roussel, Jean-Jacques, Raymond's grandfather, 13, 52
 Roussel, Marguerite, Raymond's mother, 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 36, 39, 43, 52, 54, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 72, 73, 75, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 92, 93, 94, 95, 98, 102, 105, 106, 107, 108, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 116, 118, 119, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 131, 135, 139, 140, 141, 143, 144, 146, 147, 150, 151, 158, 175, 176, 219, 250, 271, 272, 273, 286, 290, 297, 300, 314, 316, 328
 Roussel, Pierre-Louis, 30
 Roussel, Pol, poet, 217
 Roussel, Raymond (namesake), 217
 Roussel, Romain, novelist, 217
 Rousselet, Louis, author, 97
 Rousselet, Louis, murderer, 97, 289, 290
 Rousselle, Henri, 218
 Rouvier, 143
 Roux, Jean-Charles, Dr, 170, 272
 Roy, Émile-Paul, Commissioner, 108, 109
 Roy, Jean, 29
 Royaumeont, de, 245
 Roze, Edmond, 202
 Rozet, René, 18, 105
 Rubinstein, Anton, 43
 Rubinstein, Mme, 236
 Rul, 136
 Rumpelmayer, Nice, 72
 Rumpelmayer, Paris, 184, 272
- Ruolz, Count of, 23
 Ruolz-Montchal, Henri, Comte de, 23
 Ruskin, 84
- S., A., 234
 Sabouraud, Dr, 285
 Sachs, Maurice, 351
 Sade, D.A.F., Marquis de, 229
 Saillard, 262
 Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, 332
 Saint-Isles, 120, 136
 Saint-Réal, 155, 211
 Saint-Saëns, Camille, 32, 36, 226
 Samain, Albert, 51
 Santos-Dumont, Alberto, 92, 125, 153
 Sapeck, 157
 Saqui, Joseph, 73
 Sarcey, de, 223
 Sarcey, Francisque, 16
 Sardou, Victorien, 114
 Sargentton, Jacques, 29, 65
 Saron, Daniel, 150
 Sarrazin, Gabriel, 38
 Saurer, 254, 272
 Savoir, Alfred, 199
 Savy, Maryse, 196, 197
 Schiller, 158
 Schneider, Hortense, 21
 Schneider, Louis, 214
 Schubert, Franz, 74
 Schumann, Robert, 74
 Schuré, Édouard, 38
 Schuster, Jean, 324
 Sciascia, Leonardo, 337, 338, 343
 Scize, Pierre, 195, 205
 Scott, Georges, 168
 Sée, Edmond, 198, 245, 259
 Seil Kor, 22, 120
 Sem, 163, 164
 Sémary, 120
 Sentinelle, horse, 111
 Serena, Leopoldo, 338
 Sergine, Véra, 237, 238, 239
 Séroul, Duhi, 101
 Séverine, 24
 Seymour, Henry, Lord, 110
 Shakespeare, William, 33, 34, 103, 267, 277, 278
 Shelley, 162
 Shurmann, 223
 Sicardi, 143
 Signoret, 191, 192, 195, 196, 197, 198, 200, 201, 202, 204, 205, 206, 208, 209, 213, 236,

- 245
 Silvestre, Victor, 228, 230
 Sivan, Jacques, 310
 Simon, Marcel, 77
 Sirdah, 43, 117, 120
 Skariofsky, 120, 136
 Snyders, Franz, 142
 Solange, 261, 262
 Solmi, Sergio, 89
 Sophia, Queen of the Netherlands, 13
 Sorbets, Gaston, 173
 Soreau, 117, 120
 Sorel, Albert-Émile, 44
 Sorel, Cécile, 78
 Sorlin, Mme, 328
 Sorrell, Martin, 43, 102, 175
 Sota, Ramon de la, 124
 Souday, Paul, 313
 Soupault, Philippe, 16, 24, 148, 184, 190, 191, 218, 219, 245, 264, 278, 280, 329
 Spinoza, 160
 Stebler, 196
 Stern, Simone, 22, 126
 Stoulig, Raymond, 119
 Stravinsky, 266
 Strowski, 189
 Suchet, family, 295
 Sullerot, François, 261
 Swarte, Madeleine de, 222, 224
 Sylvain, Jacques, 245, 316
- Tachar [?], 16
 Tailhade, Laurent, 157
 Talou, 61
 Talu VII, 98, 105, 117, 120, 134, 136, 137, 138, 320
 Tanira a Tarahu, 179
 Tanira iti, 179
 Tarahu, Puta a, 177, 179
 Tarbé, Edmond, 52
 Tarente, Princesse de, 68, 72
 Tartakower, Xavier, 324, 325, 326, 327
 Tere hapaïtahaa, 179
 Terrasse, Claude, 78
 Terümacvarua
 Apomare/Arümporapora,
 Queen of Bora Bora, 179
 Tetuanuirerehaore, (see also
 Rarahu), 179
 Thénard, Louis-Jacques, Baron, 13
 Theuriet, André, 78
 Thiercelin, architect, 73
 Thil, Marcel, 297
- Thimbre, Yvonne, 289
 Thomas, Ambroise, 29, 30
 Thomas, Henri, 154
 Thomen, 120
 Timmory, Gabriel, 207
 Tinayre, Lucile, Maître, 289
 Tingle, 96
 Tinsseau, Léon de, 24
 Titian, 223, 242
 Tombola, King, 96
 Torchu, Ovide, 320
 Toudouze, Gustave, 78
 Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de, 15
 Tramar, Comtesse de, 274
 Treich, Léon, 229, 245
 Treize, Thérèse, 233
 Tremblay, Pierre, butler, 252, 257, 298, 299, 329
 Trézel, 92, 144, 153, 228, 235
 Trouguénéné, Queen, 176
 Tunc, 136, 262
 Tzara, Tristan, 246, 329, 330, 350
- Ulfälri, de, 27
 Uhde, Wilhelm, 97
 Uré, 136
 Urfé, Honoré d', 280
 Ursula, 22
- Valdemont, 262
 Valéry, Paul, 219, 281
 Valette, Robert D., 350
 Vallée, Eugène, 44, 100, 101, 217, 286, 300, 301, 307, 310, 311, 319, 335
 Vallette, Alfred, 157
 Valon, Bertrand, Comte de, 110, 111
 Van Dyck, 73
 Van Goeten, Mme, 136
 Van Huysum, Jan, 142
 Vanier, Léon, 43
 Van Leer, 269
 Varennes, Alexandre de, 138
 Vascody, 23
 Vaughan, Baronne de, 125
 Vaunois, Louis, 44
 Veber, Pierre, 198, 200, 202, 204, 260, 261
 Veil-Picard, 139
 Verax, 83
 Vergne, F., 27
 Verlaine, Paul, 44
 Verlot, Constant, 155
 Vernansal, Baptiste, 145
 Verne, Jules, 9, 66, 67, 84, 103, 113, 152, 153, 157, 187, 188, 191, 225, 227, 254, 324
- Verrailoux, Joseph, 107
 Veyrassat, Jules-Jacques, 142
 Verus, Emperor, 164
 Vian, Boris, 256
 Viaud, Gustave, 177
 Viaud, Julien, see Loti, Pierre
 Videcoq, Edmond, 297
 Vigée-Lebrun, Mme, 143
 Villenave, 262
 Villers, L., 143
 Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, 154, 255
 Vimercati, Nina, see Ganderax, Nina
 Vincent, François, 158
 Vinci, Leonardo da, 241
 Vitrac, Roger, 26, 69, 85, 89, 92, 115, 148, 168, 175, 198, 199, 201, 206, 207, 209, 212, 230, 244, 245, 247, 249, 251, 270, 330, 348, 349, 350
 Viviani, René, 155
 Vivien, René, 301
 Voltaire, 167, 223, 323, 350
 Voronof, 270
 Vrin, J., 280
- Wagner, Richard, 25, 74, 234, 259, 337
 Wague, Georges, 236
 Waldeck-Rousseau, 70
 Wallace, Richard, Sir, 14
 Walter, Lucien, 262
 Warrain, Judge, 289
 Weill, Nathé, 106
 Wells, H.G., 103, 137
 Welper, 143
 Whirligig, 96, 136
 Wieniavsky, 75
 Wilde, Oscar, 299
 Wildenstein, Georges, 26, 140, 297
 Willette, Adolphe, 70
 Willy, 31, 89, 163, 164, 204, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 229, 241, 242, 243
 Wisner, René, 206
 Wolff, Pierre, 228, 230, 258
 Worth, dressmaker, 17, 26
- Xerxes, 285
- Yahne, Léonie, 120, 131, 135, 136, 137
 Yaour IX, 18, 97, 117, 120, 132, 134, 137, 138
 Yd, Berthe d', 227, 228
 Yd, Jean d', 228, 262
 Yd, Renée d', 262
 Yonnel, 228, 232, 235, 236, 238
 Yturri, Gabriel de, 190
 Yuriewsky, Princess, 125
 Yussupov, Félix, 125
- Zabulon, Isaac, 53
 Zamacois, Miguel, 301
 Zellini, Mlle, 196, 197
 Zéoug, 22, 43, 75, 227, 228, 231
 Zévaco, Michel, 188
 Ziem, Felix, 139, 142
 Zingales, Giuseppe, 344, 345, 346, 347
 Zo, Achille, 308
 Zo, Henri-A., 63, 188, 221, 243, 290, 307, 308, 309, 334, 341
 Zo-Laroque, Blanche-Marie
 Adélaïde, 308
 Zola, Émile, 78, 109, 205
 Zuméranaz, 258, 262

PICTURE SOURCES

- John Ashbery: 62 (top), 79, 98, 111, 130, 132, 134, 170, 203, 253.
 Bibliothèque Nationale, Roussel
 Archive: 15, 17, 19, 26, 31, 62 (bottom), 66, 67, 93, 118, 122, 123, 138, 177, 179, 180, 284, 285, 336.

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Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) — poet, novelist, playwright, musician, chess enthusiast, neurasthenic, homosexual, drug addict, probable suicide — an astonishing individual whose life was almost as intriguing as his unique literary opus.

Following a perfect "Proustian" childhood, Roussel, the son of immensely rich parents, rejected a musical career and began a series of literary projects of such impossible complexity that he soon suffered a serious mental collapse. His poetry, novels and plays, written using intricate hidden formulae and processes, were intended by him to mirror the "glory" of his favourite writers, but they only succeeded in provoking astonishment, outrage or derision among his own circle and the literary establishment of the day. He nevertheless attracted the support of the more avant-garde literary movements, such as the Surrealists, whose work in turn he found totally baffling.

Roussel's riches allowed him to publish his own works and mount luxurious productions of his plays: these attracted a critical response that was startling in its fury. If his public life seemed a failure, his personal life achieved a mythical fame due to the reported eccentricity of his eating habits (he'd take all his daily meals together one after the other to save time for writing), clothing (he wore most of his expensive clothes only a few times), sexuality (his parents hired him a pretend "mistress" so that his homosexuality would not be suspected), and travel (in a specially constructed motorised caravan). When his profligacy finally resulted in the squandering of his fortune, he took flight to a hotel in Palermo and died of a barbiturate overdose in mysterious circumstances.

Since his death, Roussel's writings have come to be seen as not only unique, but as a body of work that has aroused enthusiastic appreciation and interpretation from nearly all the major French literary movements that have followed. His works have been championed by the Surrealists, the writers around the Nouveau Roman and the Oulipo, while he is the only author to whom Michel Foucault devoted an entire book.

In France this biography, based upon a huge hoard of Roussel's personal papers discovered in 1989, is acknowledged as the standard work on Roussel's life.

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